

# African Americans and the Democratic Party

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**Grade Level:** Middle/High

**Duration of lesson:** 2 periods

**Overview:**

Having aligned themselves with the Republican Party since the days of Abraham Lincoln, what made African Americans switch to the Democrats during the Depression Era? This lesson explores why African Americans voted for Franklin Roosevelt, despite the fact that the Democratic Party had traditionally denied them basic civil rights. Using primary sources and a variety of voices from the period, students can discover how the Depression affected African-American workers, and why black voters switched their allegiance during the period. Students will also learn how Democrats and Republicans of the time responded to the call for civil rights. Roosevelt's problem was that in order to retain his position of leadership, he had to keep the Southern Democrats – who time and again denied African Americans the vote in their states – within the party. Although Roosevelt made no move to reverse the legal segregation at the time, he did invite several African-American leaders to serve as advisors to the administration. He also ensured that African Americans had access to relief during the worst days of the Depression. Because of Roosevelt's willingness to engage African Americans as Americans, he won their votes for the Democratic Party for decades to come.

## **Related National History Standards:**

### **Content Standards:**

#### **Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)**

**Standard 1:** The causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society.

### **Historical Thinking Standards:**

#### **Standard 2: Historical Comprehension**

- A. Reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage.
- D. Evidence historical perspectives.

#### **Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation**

- A. Identify the author or source of the historical document or narrative.
- D. Consider multiple perspectives.
- E. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas, and the role of chance.

#### **Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities**

- D. Identify the gaps in the available records, marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place, and construct a sound historical interpretation.

**Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making**

- A. Identify issues and problems in the past.
- D. Evaluate alternative courses of action.
- E. Formulate a position or course of action on an issue.

**Lesson Objectives:**

- Students will identify factors that caused African Americans to shift party loyalty from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party.
- Students will review ways in which African Americans benefited from New Deal programs.
- Students will analyze primary sources to identify historical perspectives.
- Students will make predictions about the expectations of African Americans from the Roosevelt Administration.

## Topic Background

In the Presidential election of 1936, African Americans voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic Party, and, in particular, for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. However, at the time their vote was not necessarily seen as a vote for the Democrats, but, rather as a vote in support of Roosevelt himself and the policies of the New Deal. The movement of African-American voters away from the Republican Party was part of a nationwide shift that had arisen in the creation of the so-called Roosevelt Coalition. This national shift would make the Democrats the majority party for the next several decades.

The question of why African Americans shifted their historical allegiance to the Republican Party in the Depression era raises some interesting questions. Was a vote for Roosevelt synonymous with economic recovery in the African-American community? Was there an emotional component to this vote? Were Roosevelt and his administration champions of civil rights?

Since the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, African Americans had voted primarily with the Republican Party. The Republican Party was the party of Abraham Lincoln, “the Great Emancipator.” After Lincoln’s assassination, the so-called “Radical Republicans” helped to establish the Freedman’s Bureau, passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866, and drafted the Fourteenth Amendment, preventing states from denying rights to U.S. citizens. In 1868, Ulysses S. Grant was elected President with the help of Southern African Americans, who were voting in a presidential election for the first time. During Grant’s presidency, the Radical Republicans introduced and ratified the Fifteenth Amendment, which stated that a citizen’s (male only) right to vote could not be denied because of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” African Americans, particularly former slaves, became loyal members of the Republican Party.

When Reconstruction ended in 1877, Southern Democrats regained power and began passing and implementing legal restrictions such as the poll tax, literacy tests and “grandfather” clauses, effectively disenfranchising much of the new African-American electorate. In addition, the Southern states passed a series of “Jim Crow” laws, which regulated most areas of private and public life. The end of Reconstruction also marked the end of the limited national political courtship of African-American voters. African Americans were either stripped of their political rights, as in the South, or, as in the North, their numbers were not large enough to affect the outcome of any election.

Increasingly intolerable conditions in the South spurred a movement northward of African Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, known as the Great Migration. However, discrimination was also a fact of life in Northern industrial cities. Covenants limited the housing stock available to black families and labor unions denied membership to African-American workers. Employers frequently hired blacks only as a last resort. In 1896 the Supreme Court legalized segregation in its ruling in *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, saying that “separate but equal” facilities did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment. Segregation by law (*de jure*) in the South, and by custom (*de facto*) in the North, was entrenched in society and law well into the middle of the twentieth century.

While African-American suffrage was secure in the Northern and Western states, and small numbers of African Americans were appointed to local public offices during the tenure of Theodore Roosevelt, on the whole, blacks possessed little political or economic power at the turn of the century. Southerner Woodrow Wilson ran on the Democratic ticket for the presidency in 1912 with promises of action on civil rights issues, winning the endorsement of the fledgling National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). But once in office, Wilson did little to advance the cause of equal protection for African Americans. Some historians have concluded that his administration's policies, in effect, reinforced segregation within the ranks of the federal government. This lack of progress in civil, political and economic rights in the aftermath of World War One led to the loss of the African-American vote for the Democrats in the Election of 1920, as the black electorate returned to the fold of the Republican Party. African Americans during the period increasingly united around the issue of civil rights and anti-lynching legislation, and predominantly-black neighborhoods in major urban centers began to emerge as cohesive voting blocks that could potentially influence the outcome of an election.

The Election of 1928 signaled the first time since Reconstruction that a national political party made an organized effort to woo the African-American vote. Al Smith, the Democratic presidential candidate and the first Catholic nominee for the office from a major party, enlisted the help of James Weldon Johnson, the executive secretary of the NAACP, and Walter White, the assistant secretary, who was on leave from the organization to research a book on the lynching crisis in the United States (Weiss, 9). White especially was determined to stop both parties from taking the African-American vote for granted. While the Smith campaign stated it wanted to show that the Democratic Party had changed, in reality, no outward effort was made to include African Americans or to address racial issues. White and Johnson drafted a statement of support for Smith, but it was never issued. As a result, White withdrew his public support, although he continued to provide behind-the-scenes advice.

Despite the defection of White, a "Smith-for-President Colored League" was formed and campaigned across the country, arguing that African Americans had paid their debt to Lincoln (Weiss, 10). The Republicans, in backing their candidate, Herbert Hoover, countered with reminders of the little that had been done by Democrats in forwarding the cause of African-American rights (Weiss, 10). Although Smith did not receive a large number of votes in African-American districts nationwide, he did receive more than any previous Democratic candidate. In Chicago, for example, the Democratic Party received 11% of the black vote in 1920, 10% in 1924, and 27% in 1928 (Weiss, 10-11).

In the Election of 1932, despite the ravages of the first three years of the Great Depression and the Hoover administration's inability to improve the dire economic situation, African Americans did not overwhelmingly support the Democratic Party. In Chicago, the Democratic Party received only 21% of the African American's vote – a decrease from four years earlier (Weiss, 30).

At the time, the Democratic ticket seemed to offer African Americans no viable alternative to Republican candidates. As governor of New York, Franklin

Roosevelt did not have a sterling civil rights record. Additionally, the Democratic choice of Texan John Nance Garner for the Vice Presidency was not acceptable to most African Americans, since Texas was known as a Jim Crow state that persisted in denying blacks the vote.

However, the Hoover administration had also done little to earn the loyalty of African Americans. African Americans were disproportionately affected by the Depression, losing jobs at a greater rate than whites. Another issue that had angered African Americans was Hoover's nomination of John J. Parker, who had been outspoken in his comments supporting the disenfranchisement of African Americans during a run for governor of North Carolina, to the United States Supreme Court (Weiss, 17). For the first time, the NAACP found its political voice in successfully lobbying against Parker's nomination.

For most African Americans, the Election of 1932 represented a choice between a candidate who, though disappointing, was from the party of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, and a largely unknown candidate with little proclivity toward the rights of African Americans. Moreover, Roosevelt represented the party that had historically oppressed African Americans through Jim Crow laws and had blocked anti-lynching legislation. Nonetheless, stresses of the time compelled a few well-known African Americans to openly defect to the Democratic Party. Robert L. Vann, editor of the influential black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, openly called for African Americans to "emancipate themselves from blind allegiance to the Republican Party" (Weiss, 16). Yet, despite the lack of assistance from the Republicans, most African Americans chose the devil they knew.

Roosevelt took office in March of 1933. Shortly after his inauguration, the NAACP requested a meeting with the new president to discuss racial concerns. The NAACP representatives were not surprised when their request was denied, but they were determined not to give up. The new administration, subsided by the problems generated by the Depression, tended to view African Americans under the greater umbrella of "Americans." Since he was trying to help the American people as a whole, Roosevelt reasoned, there was no need to single blacks out as a group. Moreover, the president needed the support of southern Democratic politicians to pass his wide-sweeping legislation.

In the first hundred days, the administration pushed through numerous pieces of legislation. Among this legislation were the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) that included the Public Works Administration (PWA), and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). On the surface, these acts appeared to do nothing to further the cause of civil rights or of African Americans. Each program was administered on the local level and controlled by the local government. While African Americans were the recipients of aid, the Southern states practiced discriminatory distribution procedures, despite federal anti-discrimination regulations. It was not until intervention from the federal government that blacks began to receive a proportionate share of assistance. Another complicating issue was that the list of occupations regulated by the National Recovery Administration (NRA) did not include jobs typically held by

African Americans. The New Deal farming programs sent relief directly to landowners, who, more often than not, failed to pass along the assistance to their black tenants or sharecroppers.

Over time, African Americans received assistance from these programs, in part, due to greater intervention from Washington. The New Deal offered a degree and level of support to African Americans that differed markedly from past administrations. While segregation and discrimination was prominent in the local administration of relief programs, this reality ran counter to the administration's official policy. National policy was difficult to enforce at the local level, particularly in the South, leading many African Americans to feel excluded from relief programs. Nonetheless, the administration sought to ensure that the programs were implemented fairly, which, for African Americans, represented a drastic break from the status quo.

In addition to non-discrimination policies, the Roosevelt administration was differed from previous administrations in other significant ways. Both Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt were publicly seen and photographed with African Americans, something prior presidents and administrations permitted only infrequently. Prominent African Americans were often invited guests of the White House. The President and First Lady visited New Deal encampments, giving speeches of support to predominantly black audiences. Further, Roosevelt appointed Harold Ickes the administrator of the PWA. With a history of sensitivity to the cause of civil rights, Ickes, who once headed the Chicago branch of the NAACP, tried to ensure that African Americans received a "square deal" (Weiss, 51). Finally, Roosevelt appointed more African Americans to federal positions than all previous Republican administrations combined. Although the positions were not often high profile or high level, the appointment of African Americans in those positions was important in itself.

Perhaps the most prominent political symbol of the Roosevelt administration's attitude toward African Americans was the existence of the "Black Cabinet." The Black Cabinet was an unofficial group of African Americans on the staff of New Deal agencies. The existence of the group served two important functions. First, it insured that African Americans had jobs in government agencies. And second, the Cabinet represented African Americans working from within the structure of the government (Weiss, 136). Led by Mary McLeod Bethune, the group served in an unofficial capacity as advisor on racial matters to the Roosevelt administration. Working behind the scenes, the Black Cabinet assured that the concerns of African Americans were heard by the administration and helped to effect change in the administration of several New Deal programs.

The Election of 1936 represented a major shift in the allegiance and voting patterns of African American voters. African Americans, however, were not voting merely for the Democratic Party at this time. Their vote was an affirmation of New Deal policies and the Roosevelt administration. Despite a certain level of discrimination and segregation, New Deal policies had positively affected African Americans: Jobs programs such as the National Youth Administration (NYA) employed 25,000; the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) enlisted 200,000; and

the Works Progress Administration (WPA) assisted 1,000,000 Americans (Spencer, 307). This election symbolized the first time since Reconstruction that national political parties actively courted African Americans. Because of their increased population in Northern cities, it was possible for blacks to sway contests in key states such as Illinois, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. Thus the African American vote was important to both the Democrats and the Republicans.

The 1936 campaign began in earnest over the summer with the Republican Convention in Cleveland and the Democratic Convention in Philadelphia. At the start of the conventions, the Republican platform included limited language regarding African Americans; the Democratic platform contained no formal language at all. However, actions were taken at the Democratic convention to enhance the visibility of African Americans in the Party. In ending the two-thirds requirement, the Democratic Party loosened the grip of Southern Democrats on presidential nominations (Weiss, 184). Unlike the Republicans, the Democrats seated African Americans among the press and the delegates (Weiss, 185). African Americans delivered addresses from the podium in Philadelphia, and were among the delegation notifying Vice President Garner of his re-nomination.

This very visibility, however, revealed rifts within the Party. At the convention, Southern white delegates walked out in protest of the African-American speakers and delegates. This fissure within the Party made every potential voter, or group of voters, that much more important if Roosevelt was to win re-election.

Both parties actively sought the African American vote in several ways. Each bought advertisements in the black press. The Democratic Party, it was said, tried to exchange advertising for support (Weiss, 187). Each party created short movie clips extolling the virtues of its platform and candidate. The Republicans enlisted the help of Jesse Owens, the African-American hero of the 1936 Olympics. Each party created a "colored" division to lobby for its candidates. These divisions spread across the nation and were effective in enlisting support from the masses. Perhaps the biggest advantage for the Democratic Party was the support of the Good Neighbor League. Although the Good Neighbor League was an auxiliary of the Democratic Party, it was perceived as being somewhat independent, and used its influence among the clergy and other non-affiliated Roosevelt supporters who did not want to become directly involved with the Democratic Party (Spencer, 308). The Good Neighbor League attracted well-known African Americans and sponsored a huge rally to celebrate the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation at Madison Square Garden. The culminating event of the rally was the display of three figures: Jesus, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, the so-called "three emancipators of the black race" (Spencer, 311).

When the election results were tallied, Roosevelt and the Democrats had won about three-fourths of the African American vote (Schlesinger, 2848). In Chicago, the figure was 49%, an increase of over 100% since the Election of 1932. Why did African Americans vote so heavily Democratic? One reason was

the New Deal and its economic policies. The average African American citizen of the time had low expectations for the passage of substantial civil rights legislation, and most people based their decisions on their economic situation (Weiss, 209-210). New Deal programs, although often discriminatory, did help African Americans gain employment and provided visible, tangible relief. African Americans, then, did not see themselves as voting for the traditional, racist Southern Democratic Party. They were voting for the party of the New Deal and the man who had created its programs.

On an emotional level, there were a variety of reasons African Americans voted for the Democrats. The Roosevelt administration had appointed more African Americans than prior administrations, and individuals within the administration, such as Harold Ickes and Eleanor Roosevelt, genuinely wanted to help the situation of African Americans. Even the President, without creating official policy, created a climate of fair treatment and was willing to be seen in public with African-American officials. In short, African Americans voted to re-elect President Roosevelt because of their perception that they were counted among the “forgotten people,” and that the New Deal represented a “token of hope” (Weiss, 211).

### **Annotated Bibliography:**

Kennedy, David M., *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

*Freedom From Fear* is a detailed synthesis of the political, social, economic, and diplomatic climate of the United States from the decline of the economy and the beginning of the Great Depression to the conclusion and aftermath of World War II.

Weiss, Nancy J., *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

*Farewell to the Party of Lincoln* is the study of the transformation of the role of African Americans from loyal members of the Republican Party to loyal members of the Democratic Party. Weiss attempts to analyze the individuals, groups and outside influences that affected the voting patterns of African Americans in the wake of the Great Depression.

Jeffries, John W., Katherine Lapis Segrue, and Gary B. Nash, eds. *Encyclopedia of American History: The Great Depression and World War II 1929-1945*. Volume VIII. Facts on File, Inc., 2003.

*Encyclopedia of American History* is one volume in a series outlining the history of the United States. This secondary source is extremely helpful in providing background information and further resources for research. Each article was

written by a historian who specializes in that particularly field of history and covers topics in all areas, arranged in an A to Z format.

Schlesinger, Arthur M., Fred L. Israel, and William P. Hansen, eds., *History of American Presidential Elections: 1789-1968*. Volume VII (1928-1940). Chelsea House Publishers, 1985.

This text is a comprehensive examination of presidential elections in United States History. Each selection covers the races from entry of the candidates to conventions to campaigns and analyzes the results. There is also an Appendix following each entry, which provides the text of speeches and editorials concerning the election.

Sears, James M., "Black Americans and the New Deal," *The History Teacher*. Volume 10. Number 1 (November 1976): 89-105.

This article examines the effects of the Great Depression on minorities and the extent to which New Deal programs affected African Americans.

Spencer, Thomas T., "The Good Neighbor League Colored Committee and the 1936 Democratic Presidential Campaign." *Journal of Negro History*. Volume 63. Number 4 (October 1978): 307-316.

This article examines the Good Neighbor League Colored Committee and their efforts to organize support for the Democratic Party in the 1936 Presidential Election Campaign. The article analyzes the historical effects of African American involvement and the reluctance of African Americans to become involved in a partisan committee.

## **Vocabulary**

- Realignment:** Any election which represents a bold departure from previous patterns of voting. Most specifically, it refers to any one of several United States presidential elections in which geographic bases of power for each of the two parties were significantly altered, resulting in a new political power structure and status quo.
- Coalition:** An alliance between entities, during which they cooperate in joint action, each in their own self-interest. This alliance may be temporary, or a matter of convenience.
- Segregation:** A term usually used for the separation of people by race, either by law or custom. Laws enforcing segregation of blacks from whites became common in the South in the decades after the Civil War.
- Discrimination:** An intentional or unintentional act which adversely affects employment opportunities because of race, color, religion, sex, handicap, marital status, or national origin.

## Teaching Procedures

1. Project the following question and ask students to respond:

**Why are habits difficult to break?** Solicit student responses to the question and list them on the overhead or chalkboard.

Extend students' thinking by asking:

**What role does fear play when someone considers breaking a habit?**

**Does having a habit make people feel safe and secure?**

**What factors might motivate someone to break a habit?**

**Focus students' responses on someone pointing out the problems that stem from the habit or a personal desire to change, or being forced to stop the habit. Reinforce the political implications of a group of people habitually voting for one particular political party by consulting the Content Narrative and discuss the relationship between African Americans and the Republican Party between 1865-1932. Focus the discussion on why the 'habit' of voting consistently for the Republican Party developed. Students should list the reasons in Part I of Resource Sheet #1, "African Americans and the New Deal: Democrats or Republicans, How Will They Vote?" Conclude this discussion by asking students to make a prediction:**

**In the 1936 presidential election, will African Americans vote for the Republican Candidate Alf Landon or incumbent President Franklin D. Roosevelt?** Have students' record their prediction in Part II of Resource Sheet #1.

2. Divide students into five cooperative groups. Provide each group with a copy of either Resource Sheet #2, "Negroes At The Crossroads," Resource Sheet #3, "What Are You Voting on Mister, Campaign Issues or Party Labels?," Resource Sheet #4, "Text of President Roosevelt's Howard University Address," Resource Sheet #5, " 'Voters' Swing to New Deal A Political Revolution," or Resource Sheet #6, "Kelly Miller Compares Landon with Roosevelt." Instruct the groups to read their source and list the reasons to vote for the Democrats, and the reasons to vote for the Republicans in Part III of Resource Sheet #1.
3. Conduct a jigsawing activity by regrouping students so each group contains at least one member representing each Resource Sheet. Have students share their findings and fill out the chart in Part III of Resource Sheet #1 completely.

4. Ask students to raise their hand if their initial prediction about African American voting preferences in the 1936 presidential election were true or false. For students who predict that African Americans would vote for the Republican Party ask:

**Why did you feel this would happen?**

**What factors seemed to impede the Republican Party's ability to attract African American voters?** Answers should include a discussion of Roosevelt's personality, Anti-discrimination policies, upheld by the Democratic Party in the South, the Republican Party's neglecting to address civil rights issues, Eleanor Roosevelt, relief agencies.

For students who predict that African Americans would vote for the Democratic Party ask:

**What factors seemed to assist the Democratic Party's ability to attract African American voters?** Answers should include a discussion of Roosevelt's personality, Anti-discrimination policies, upheld by the Democratic Party in the South, the Republican Party's neglecting to address civil rights issues, Eleanor Roosevelt, relief agencies.

**What were African Americans expecting from the Roosevelt administration in exchange for their support?**

**How might this change in the voting patterns of African Americans impact the Democratic Party's political power?** Answers should include a discussion of the control Democrats exerted over the presidency between 1932 and 1968 and the Congress until 1994, as well as the strange bedfellows that Southern Democrats and African Americans made within the same party.

5. Assess students' understanding of the realignment of African American voters by having them revisit their prediction made in Part II of Resource Sheet #1 and assessing its accuracy in Part IV of Resource Sheet #1.

**Primary Source Annotation:**

**Election of 1936 Articles from the Baltimore *Afro American***

"Text of President Roosevelt's Howard University Address." *Afro American* (Baltimore). 31 October 1936, p. 7.

W.P. Hayes, "Negroes At the Crossroads." *Afro American* (Baltimore). 3 October 1936, p. 6.

Matthews, Ralph. "What Are You Voting on Mister, Campaign Issues or Party Labels?" *Afro American* (Baltimore). 17 October 1936, p. 9.

Easterling, Louis. "Voters' Swing to New Deal: A Political Revolution" *Afro American* (Baltimore). 12 September 1936, p. 7.

Miller, Kelly. "Kelly Miller Compares Landon with Roosevelt" *Afro American* (Baltimore). 9 September 1936, p. 6.

These were found in the holdings of the Enoch Pratt Free Library at Franklin and Cathedral Streets, Baltimore, Maryland. These sources are available on microfilm and represent the opinions, attitudes, and perceptions of the African American community in Baltimore.