

Podcasting the Past
European and world history
Part G: USA, 1918-1968

This document is part of a series that summarises recent research published on the key issues outlined in Section G of the [Higher History Course Specification](#). Although the summaries are wide-ranging, they do not cover all of the literature ever published on the key issues. Instead, the summaries highlight some new research findings and directions, and illustrate how new historical research informs old historical debates, broadening our understanding of the past. This document is intended to supplement, not replace, pre-existing guidance on this topic.

4. An assessment of the effectiveness of the New Deal

A) The Role of Roosevelt and Confidence Building

- Daniels (2015) presents Roosevelt as a consummate politician and administrator who achieved his policy goals thanks, in part, to his management of reporters, advisers, political adversaries, and the historical record. Roosevelt's abilities as a politician and an administrator led him to major electoral victories and put him in a strong position to deliver the New Deal.

- Rejecting the theory that Roosevelt's 1932 election campaign was full of 'sunny generalities', **Rauchway (2019)** argues that the New Deal was 'on the ballot in 1932. According to him, during the campaign, Roosevelt committed to 'nearly all of what would become the important programs of the New Deal', demonstrating his 'clarity of purpose'. Similarly, **Neman and Jacobs (2010)** contend that the New Deal was merely 'tolerated' by Americans. Roosevelt 'moved ahead of public attitudes' about New Deal policies; his leadership was pivotal in delivering them.

- **Burghardt and Scott (2015)** make the case that Hollywood had a role in building support for the New Deal. Highlighting the similarities between Roosevelt's rhetoric and the 1937 film *Captains Courageous*, Burghardt and Scott conclude that 'the film, which on the surface displays the hallmarks of a conservative cultural production, actually functions as a pro-collectivist, pro-New Deal message about the perils of dishonest, unbridled competition.' **Kotlowski (2017)** makes a similar case: Hollywood cemented Roosevelt's image as a great president who overcame physical disability, inspired the public, and implemented effective policies.

- **Downey (2009)** explains that Frances Perkins, Labor Secretary in the Roosevelt administration, was the person who advanced much of the president's domestic agenda. According to one reviewer, Perkins shaped such initiatives like the National Recovery Administration, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and Social Security – the blueprint for America's welfare state.'

B) Banking

- In their book on the Homeowners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), **Fishback, Rose and Snowden (2013)** explain that the programme refinanced mortgages in danger of foreclosure, stabilised house prices, and prevented a mass decline in home ownership. However, the program did not reverse all of the damage from the foreclosure crisis of the Depression and the HOLC, ultimately, foreclosed on 19 percent of its own loans. Overall, the HOLC's loan refinancing program was responsible for a modest loss to US taxpayers – about 2% of the value of its entire loan portfolio.

C) Agriculture

- **Depew and Fishback (2013)** argue that the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) 'had a significant role in the displacement of agricultural workers.' The objective of the AAA was to 'take land out of production' to raise agricultural prices, but according to Depew and Fishback, it 'contributed to the long-run demise of the southern land tenure system as it helped knock out the sharecropper rung in the agricultural labour ladder and pushed black managing tenants off of the land.'
- **Fishback (2013)** has made a similar point elsewhere. According to him, the New Deal was a mixed success: public works and relief spending had state income multipliers of around one, increased consumption activity, attracted internal migration, reduced crime rates, and lowered several types of mortality. On the other hand, farm programmes, for example, helped large-scale farmers but eliminated opportunities for sharecroppers, tenants, and farm workers.
- **Sato (2020)** refutes the orthodoxy surrounding the food stamp plan, administered by the Federal Surplus Commodities Corporation (FSCC) from May 1939. The plan was to sell surplus commodities through commercial channels, boosting agricultural prices while increasing the purchasing power of low-income women. In actuality, women's access to the plan remained limited: because of the gendered principle of the New Deal – the 'deserving male breadwinner' and 'keeping families intact' – most women had to access the plan through their husbands.

D) Industry

- One of the key questions in this area of research is whether the New Deal was a *challenge to* or an *extension of* big business power. Domhoff and Webber (2011) argue that 'corporate moderates' were heavily involved in designing parts of the New Deal which, ultimately, reflected their commercial interests.
- On the other hand, there is a growing body of literature on influential labour unions during the New Deal Era. Cowie (2016), for example, argues that the New Deal marked an 'exceptional moment' in which Americans, generally, accepted they had 'collective economic rights' championed by labour unions. In this vein, Stepenof (2018) contends that, in the Philadelphian hosiery industry, labour unionism 'continued unabated through the 1920s and 1930s'; union activities in the state 'helped shape the New Deal'; and that 'labour feminism' played an important role in social reform. Taken collectively, research on different industries, in different states, suggests that bosses and workers both had a role in shaping the New Deal.
- In opposition to this view, Schickler and Caughey (2011) rebut that the public reaction against unions hindered the completion of the New Deal and, in the long-term, turned the American people against an expansive federal government.
- Beaudreau (2019) argues that the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was ineffective due to its 'non-negligible internal inconsistencies.' The 'across-the-board minimum wage' provisions in the Act did little to raise wages in industries where they were too low relative to productivity. In industries that were unaffected by rapid technological change, the Act raised wages to too high a level and lowered overall employment. Economists Moulton and Tugwell thought higher wages would increase purchasing power, stimulate demand, and grow the economy; in the end, it increased unemployment overall. According to Beaudreau, 'an unstructured and undirected approach to policy contained the seeds of its own demise.' Hanes agrees that wage inflation, and its effects, were 'due to New Deal labor policies.' Beaudreau and Taylor (2018) conclude that the ideas in the NIRA were not 'as new and radical as is often assumed' – faith in high wages, shorter workweeks, and industrial planning as a route to recovery predated the Roosevelt administration.

- **Taylor (2011)** finds that the President's Reemployment Agreement was contradictory. The policy added 2.47 million workers to the private sector payroll but was offset by a decrease of 1.1 million jobs due to artificially high wages in certain sectors of the economy. In the short term, the Agreement increased the number of jobs and reduced the number of hours worked per employee. In the longer-term, however, the NIRA promoted 'cartelisation' and led to net increase of only 80,000 jobs between August 1933 and May 1935.
- **Chicu, Vickers and Ziebarth (2013)** explain that Codes of Fair Conduct promulgated by the NIRA 'led to more anti-competitive behaviour.' Based on anecdotal evidence from contemporary trade literature, they conclude that, after the Codes came into force, plants [in the cement industry] were free to choose whatever price they liked.' There is evidence of illegal price collusion that disadvantaged the consumer.
- According to **Mata (2018)**, the 1930s transformed American capitalism and the ideal conception of 'the manager'. Based on a study of the magazines *Business Week's* and *Fortune*, he concludes that the new ideal manager was 'a political economist coordinating firms with their external environment, notably an interventionist and scrutinising state, volatile markets, and a critical public opinion.'

E) Society

- **Carroll (2013)** highlights one of the key problems at the heart of the New Deal: the partnership between the Federal Housing Administration and the Virginian Resettlement Administration effectively imposed segregation on 'racially undefined suburban areas.' Moreover, as the new housing developments in Virginia used federal tax dollars to support black families' legitimate aspirations for homeownership and a middle-class standard of living, 'their occupancy, expense, and location angered working-class whites who lived nearby', exacerbating racial tensions. Carroll emphasises the difficult balance the New Deal had to strike between the legitimate aspirations of black Americans and the regressive attitudes of white racists who, often, held the balance of power in states like Virginia.
- According to **Nelson (2019)**, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) provided much-needed relief for unemployed young men during the Great Depression, and states like Florida used CCC labour and resources to reconstruct the state's environment toward an economy centred on tourism, detaching the state from its traditional southern identity.

- **Kitchens (2013)** argues that, between 1932 and 1940, the malaria rate in Georgia counties that received help from the Works Progress Administration fell from 25.9 deaths per 100,000 to 5.3 deaths per 100,000 – 9.1 fewer deaths per 100,000.

- **Morgan (2017)** suggests that New Deal patronage, through programmes like the Federal Writers Project intensified interest in African American culture. Morgan notes that ‘Frankie and Johnny’, like the African American folktale of John Henry, became an archetype of the common man and woman struggling against adversity during the Depression. **Dossett (2020)** looks at the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) as a place for radical black theatre. According to her, the Negro Units of the FTP were ‘embraced by a number of playwrights as an opportunity to give form to a variety of political content.’

- **Gough (2016)** presents a history of the Federal Music Project (FMP) in the American West. Gough argues that the FMP not only came from an increased awareness of and enthusiasm for regionalism in American politics and culture, but that millions of people benefitted from a programme that hired almost sixteen thousand musicians.