The New Deal was introduced by President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration in 1932. His promise to help the American people out of the Great Depression included the creation of dozens of government agencies that would increase employment rates, stabilize and regulate the economy, and provide relief for Americans who were suffering financially. According to Tennessee State Historian Dr. Carroll Van West, “Tennesseans in the 1930s understood, to different degrees of course, that the New Deal changed their relationship with the federal government. They were exchanging local control and traditions for federal money and expertise. People of the Depression decade realized they were experiencing change—some of it good, some of it indifferent, and some of it for the worse. The impact was pervasive and often the change was profound—no wonder many Tennesseans of that generation still have strong feelings about the 1930s” (Tennessee’s New Deal Landscape, p. 5).

Playbill from production of Power (“Living Newspaper” p.1) [1937]

Why did New Deal programs focus on the arts? What role did the arts have in helping the nation recover from the Great Depression?

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Lesson Idea—Court-Packing Controversy

FDR ran into several obstacles getting the various New Deal programs passed through the judicial and legislative branches of government. He tried to get around this by proposing to add six new Supreme Court justices, ostensibly for the purpose of increasing efficiency among the ageing justices. This came to be known as “court-packing,” and it created quite a backlash against the president and his New Deal programs for its perceived violation of the separation of powers.

There was much opposition from members of the press and from private citizens, but some of the greatest opposition came from Roosevelt’s fellow Democrats. Before students delve into the “cons,” however, have them explore the “pros” of such an attempt by examining FDR’s own words justifying his actions. Listen to the first 1 min. 54 sec. of his Fireside Chat on the subject, while reading this transcript, then have students read the rest of the excerpts at their desks.

Ask students to anticipate what the objections to FDR’s reasoning might be. Then, split the class in half and hand out two different primary sources representing opposition from the press and from Congressional Democrats. (Remember, even members of these groups were split on the subject.)

How do these sources counter the argument set forth by FDR? How might the press influence public opinion on the matter, and how might public opinion affect Congressional votes?

Project the political cartoon from the second source on the screen and have the class as a whole analyze it using this guide. Ask students to vote on whether or not they would pass FDR’s proposal, and compare their votes to the actual outcome on this issue.

This lesson idea meets state standards for high school U.S. History & Geography (US.50).

Lesson Idea—New Deal Programs

Immediately after his election, President Franklin Roosevelt pushed forward a range of new programs, public works projects, regulations, and financial reforms as part of his New Deal. The New Deal was envisioned to combat the suffering inflicted on the nation by the Great Depression. Some of these programs were short-term, either by design or by being ruled unconstitutional by the courts, but others continue to exist today.

In this activity, students will analyze a primary source related to core New Deal programs in order to determine the purpose of each program. Begin by discussing FDR’s agenda as he came into office. You might choose to use excerpts from his first inaugural address. You may choose to divide the class into seven group and give each a different program to explore, or tackle each program as a whole class. The New Deal programs covered are Social Security, Civilian Conservation Corps, Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, Tennessee Valley Authority, Work Progress Administration, Security Exchange Commission, and National Recovery Administration.

Have students analyze the related source with each program. Ask students to answer the following questions. What is the title and abbreviation for the program? What is the purpose of the program? Does that program still exist today? For high school students, challenge them to determine how the program sought to address specific problems presented by the Great Depression and how successful each program was in meeting its goal. Students may need to pull in secondary sources to fully answer these questions.

After discussing each individual program, ask students to reflect on the overall impact of the New Deal in addressing the problems of the Great Depression. What was the legacy of the New Deal? Ask students to determine New Deal impact in their local communities.

This lesson idea meets state standards for 5th grade Social Studies (5.50) and high school U.S. History & Geography (US.49).
Lesson Idea– New Deal Critics

Though many Americans were, and still are, assisted through New Deal programs, there was never unanimous agreement on them. For every adamant support of the Roosevelt administration and the legislation passed during the 1930s, there was also a critic. Some Americans believed that the New Deal gave the government too much control by allowing immense federal intervention in the American economy. Others argued that Roosevelt-era reforms actually hurt those they intended to aid, such as small businesses and farmers. Father Charles Coughlin, a conservative, and Huey Long, a liberal, became some of the most well known New Deal critics.

Using a T-chart to record positive and negative aspects of the New Deal, ask students to analyze photographs from different agencies. Students should pay special attention to the photographs’ purpose and intended audience. Most New Deal photographers portray their agencies and projects in a positive light, so in viewing the photographs alone it may appear that the New Deal was universally agreed upon by American citizens. Click here to see how for rural Americans, farmers, homemakers, vocational students, children, and nursery workers were affected by New Deal policies. Next ask students to read excerpts from Dr. M. Santos’ interview, part of the Federal Writers’ Project. Discuss Dr. Santos’ negative opinions of the New Deal and his thoughts about President Roosevelt. Ask students to record their findings in their T-charts. Students may also view newspaper articles that are critical of the New Deal and Roosevelt’s administration. Articles from The New York Times archives are available here and here. After the class has a chance to analyze several sources, have them reference their T-charts to summarize their findings. Encourage them to cite specific details about why the New Deal was praised or criticized.

Additional resources on the New Deal can be found in the Teacher’s Guide Primary Source Set. This lesson idea meets state standards for high school U.S. History & Geography (US.50) and English (RI.KID.1 and RI.CS.6).


Many New Deal agencies are still in effect today, such as the Social Security Act, the Securities Exchange Commission, Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation.

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History provides access to many online exhibitions including The Great Depression and The New Deal, which include political cartoons, photographs, and information about New Deal-era artifacts housed by the museum.

The Living New Deal is non-profit organization hosted by the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley. The site offers a New Deal timeline, information about New Deal programs and their effects after World War II, an interactive map of New Deal projects, and more. You can even sort projects by state or city or view resources especially for teachers.
The Farm Security Administration (FSA) and Office of War Information (OWI) photographed thousands of rural Americans between 1939 and 1944. Alred T. Palmer, an OWI photographer, documented this crane operator at TVA’s Douglas Dam in Sevier County, Tennessee. What do you think the crane operator’s day-to-day life was like in the 1940s? How might he have been affected by the Great Depression or World War II? Notice the concentration on his face. What might he have been concerned about while working at the dam?

The United States’ National Park Service includes 59 parks and 417 sites. During the New Deal era, the Department of the Interior published posters created by Works Projects Administration (WPA) artists to promote national parks. Ask your students what parks they are familiar with. Have they ever visited a national park site? Why are national parks important? Why did the WPA focus on promoting them?

Since its opening in 1889, the Washington’s National Zoological Park has been a staple in D.C. In 1935, the zoo received a grant from the Public Works Administration (PWA), making construction of a pachyderm house and other updates to the zoo possible. Laborers and artists from the Works Projects Administration (WPA) also helped complete projects at the zoo.

Have students research other unique PWA and WPA projects and present them to the class. Lists of projects sorted by agency can be found here and here.

The Code of Fair Competition for the Baking Industry is just one example of the many guidelines created for industries by the National Recovery Administration (NRA), a New Deal program established in 1933 to promote fair labor practices and trade in industries throughout the United States. Although it was ruled unconstitutional in 1935, many businesses proudly associated themselves with the NRA by displaying the Blue Eagle on their storefronts.

Why were many industries willing to follow these voluntary codes? How do you think consumers reacted to the NRA?