



The New Deal Featuring Blues, Country and Folk Songs

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

What impact did the New Deal have on the United States during the Great Depression, what is the legacy of the New Deal, and how did songs reflect different feelings Americans had about the New Deal?



Art for the public The Art Institute of Chicago. Chicago Illinois, None. [Chicago: federal art project, between 1936 and 1938]
Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/98508342/>.

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students will examine songs lyrics and primary sources to evaluate the impact of New Deal programs on U.S. society. They will analyze Supreme Court cases to examine critiques and arguments against the New Deal programs. Students will finish the lesson by creating a 1930s radio broadcast that will reflect the materials covered in the lesson.

“On the farms, in the large metropolitan areas, in the smaller cities and in our villages, millions of our citizens cherish the hope that their standard of living and of thought have not gone forever. Those millions cannot hope in vain. I pledge you, I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people.”

-Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1932.

After winning the U.S. presidential election of 1932, newly-inaugurated President Franklin D. Roosevelt spent his first 100 days in office trying to fulfill the pledge he had made to Americans during the campaign. He proposed legislation with the intent that it would bring back hope to Americans in the grip of the Great Depression. The nickname of “Alphabet Soup Agencies” for his legislation was coined for proposed programs like the CCC, TVA, AAA and others.

President Roosevelt’s goal with the programs was to put Americans back to work to combat the almost 25% unemployment rate. He also wanted to bring back confidence in the economic institutions of the United States. For example, the FDIC was created to stabilize the banking industry and the SEC was established to address public mistrust for the stock market. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 was also a legislative priority to bring about business and labor reform.

Folk and Blues songs from this era convey the hope that these programs provided to people and families living through the Great Depression. “The TVA Song” by Folk musician Pete Seeger describes TVA projects that brought electricity to rural areas. “Old Age Pension Check” by Country Music Singer Roy Acuff expresses the financial relief provided from new Social Security benefits. “Government Money” by Blues performer Sleepy John Estes provides context to the government assistance that was provided to farmers through New Deal programs.

However, not all songs share a positive view of New Deal programs. “The Valley (TVA Song)” by singer Tessa Oglesby and “WPA Blues” by Country Blues singer Casey Bill Weldon describe instances where families lost their homes due to TVA and WPA projects. “New Working On The Project” by Bluesman Peetie Wheatstraw shares the precarious nature of holding onto project jobs especially near the end of the 1930s when President Roosevelt attempted to “balance the budget” in his second term.

Discontentment with the New Deal programs also played out at the national level when critics argued the constitutionality of the programs. These arguments were taken to the Supreme Court, where several programs were charged with violating American ideals like federalism and the separation of powers. Some programs were declared unconstitutional, like the National Industrial Recovery Act, while others survived, including Federal Old-Age benefits under the Social Security Act.

Historians and economists have long debated the successes and failures of the New Deal. There were varying degrees of success during the 1930s and beyond for each program. The U.S. economy did not fully recover until the United States entered World War II in 1941, which created millions of jobs in the defense and war industries. However, some New Deal programs are still present today and its legacy is felt throughout the U.S. Government and American society.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- New Deal programs and their impact on American society
- The effectiveness of New Deal programs and the societal response to those programs
- Resistance and controversies that arose from New Deal policies
- How the New Deal changed the role of the federal government

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to assess the impact of the New Deal on the United States during the Great Depression and beyond through the examination of song lyrics and primary sources.

ACTIVITIES

MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Students need a device with access to the internet.

PREPARATION

1. Display each page of **Gallery Walk - Part 2 New Deal Song** throughout the classroom.

2. Distribute electronically **Handout - New Deal Primary Sources** to each student.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 1, FDIC** and ask students:
 - Have you ever seen this placard or statement before? If so, where?
 - What do you think it means?
 - Why do you think the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) was created?
2. Display **Image 2, Check Stub** and ask students:
 - If you have a job, have you ever seen Social Security Tax on your paystubs?
 - Have you ever heard anyone talk about Social Security? What did they say?
 - Do you know what Social Security Tax is? What is its purpose?
 - Why do you think the Social Security Tax was created?
3. Explain to students that both of these government programs come from The New Deal enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during the Great Depression. Ask students:
 - Thinking about what you know about the causes and problems of the Great Depression, why do you think these two programs were created during this period?
 - What other causes and problems of the Great Depression might The New Deal address?
(*Answers might include unemployment, the stock market, homelessness, and other things discussed in a previous lesson about the causes and problems of the Great Depression.*)

PROCEDURE

PART 1: NEW DEAL PROGRAMS

1. Display **Image 3, 1932 Presidential Election Map** and inform students that President Herbert Hoover was running for re-election for a second term against Franklin D. Roosevelt. Ask students:
 - Based on the Electoral Map of 1932, what can we assume about how Americans were feeling about the Great Depression by 1932?
2. Inform students that President Roosevelt was elected in 1932 due in part to his campaign promise of a “new deal” to recover from the Great Depression. New Deal programs were nicknamed “Alphabet Soup Agencies” and referred to by their initials, like the FDIC.
3. Divide students into groups of five and distribute **Handout - New Deal Songs** to each group. Display **Image 4, Question**

Formulation Technique Directions and instruct student groups to complete Step 1 and Step 2 of the QFT directions. After an allotted amount of time, display and instruct student groups to complete Step 3 of the QFT directions.

4. Continuing in the same groups, display **Image 5, Primary Source Analysis Directions** and distribute electronically **Handout - New Deal Primary Sources** to each student (*it may be helpful for students to open two of these documents on their devices: one to write answers into and one to use to navigate the links*). Instruct student groups through the Primary Source Analysis steps and then ask students:

- Based on the primary sources you analyzed, what was the purpose of the New Deal programs?
- What issues were these programs trying to solve?
- Do any of your prioritized questions remain unanswered? How could you find out more?
- Why do you think musicians wrote songs about these New Deal programs?

5. Display **Image 4, US Growth Rate, GDP and Employment, 1930-1950**. Ask students.

- What conclusions can we draw about the New Deal programs based on the graph?
- What points on the graph do you have questions about? What might explain those points?

PART 2: REACTIONS TO THE NEW DEAL AND ITS LEGACY

1. Distribute **Handout - Part 2 New Deal Songs Analysis** and instruct students to circle the room and answer the questions as they view the lyrics on the **Gallery Walk - Part 2 New Deal Songs**. Then, ask students:

- How are the lyrics different in tone, mood, and message from the songs you looked at in the previous activity on New Deal programs?
- What is one line from the lyrics that tells you it is different?
- What issues with New Deal programs are the lyrics bringing to light?

2. Explain to students that these songs shed light on some people's grievances with New Deal programs, but other critics of the New Deal had larger issues with the programs at the constitutional level. Display **Image 7, Definitions** and discuss terms with students.

3. Display **Image 8, FDR Cartoon** and discuss questions with students.

4. Explain to students that critics of the New Deal argued the constitutionality of New Deal programs and that argument played out in the Supreme Court. Ask students:

- What is the role of the Supreme court? (*decide the constitutionality of laws*)

5. Divide students into groups of three and distribute one copy of the **Handout - Supreme Court Cases** to each group. Ask students to choose one of the cases to be responsible for so that all three cases are covered in each group. Instruct students to complete their case summary and question individually and then display **Image 9**,

Supreme Court Case Analysis to guide student discussion in their group.

6. Ask students to share their summaries of the court cases with the class until all of the court cases are covered. Then, ask students:

- Based on the Supreme Court cases you examined, how did the New Deal

programs change the role of the federal government?

- Do you think New Deal critics were correct in saying that New Deal programs gave the federal government too much power? Why or why not?
- Do you think it is the responsibility of the government to provide for its people during times of crisis? Why or why not?

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 10, The Radio** and discuss the significance of the radio.
2. Distribute **Handout - Create a Radio Broadcast** and instruct students to follow the directions to outline their own radio broadcast to advertise a New Deal project in their city or town. (*Optional: teacher can demonstrate how to use livingnewdeal.org to class*).

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Explore more on the livingnewdeal.org website. Consider:
 - What is one thing on the website that you want to know more about?
 - How would you find out more?
2. Read this article about President Roosevelt's life with polio: <https://time.com/3340831/polio-fdr-roosevelt-burns/>
3. View more of the WPA posters on the Library of Congress website: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/works-progress-administration-posters>. Consider:
 - What more have you learned about the WPA?
 - Which posters are your favorite, why?
4. Read this article about the status of Social Security in 2024: <https://www.npr.org/2024/05/06/1249406440/social-security-medicare-congress-fix-boomers-benefits>. Consider:
 - What is the situation with Social Security Benefits in 2024?
5. Explore more about the Federal Theatre Project under the WPA with "The Play That Electrified Harlem": <https://www.loc.gov/ghe/cascade/index.html?appid=8f8d1416f3234ddc8addc42880f25a4b>



6. Read about Zora Neale Hurston and the Federal Writers Project under the WPA: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/florida-folklife-from-the-works-progress-administration/articles-and-essays/a-florida-treasure-hunt/mark-of-zora/>
7. Listen to radio broadcasts with music sponsored by the WPA's Federal Music Project. <https://www.wnyc.org/series/works-progress-administration/listen>



STANDARDS

COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.

D2.His.4.9-12. Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

D2.His.12.9-12. Use questions generated about multiple historical sources to pursue further inquiry and investigate additional sources.

D2.His.14.9-12. Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

D2.His.15.9-12. Distinguish between long-term causes and triggering events in developing a historical argument.

D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

CALIFORNIA HISTORY—SOCIAL SCIENCE CONTENT STANDARDS

11.6 Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government.

4. Analyze the effects of and the controversies arising from New Deal economic policies and the expanded role of the federal government in society and the economy since the 1930s (e.g., Works Progress Administration, Social Security, National Labor Relations Board, farm programs, regional development policies, and energy development projects such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, California Central Valley Project, and Bonneville Dam).

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

US2.42 Evaluate the domestic response to the Great Depression, including the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, assessing the impact of and resistance to New Deal programming, including its impact on the economy and different groups of Americans.



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MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK STANDARDS

Topic 2. Modernity in the United States: ideologies and economies [USII.T2]

4. Using primary sources such as campaign literature, news articles/analyses, editorials, and radio/newsreel coverage, analyze the important policies, institutions, trends, and

personalities of the Depression era (e.g., Presidents Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, Huey Long, Charles Coughlin, Charles Lindbergh). Students may research and complete a case study on any one of the following policies, institutions, or trends: a. the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, b. the Securities and Exchange Commission, c. the Tennessee Valley Authority, d. the Social Security Act, e. the National Labor Relations Act, f. the Works Progress Administration, g. the Fair Labor Standards Act, h. the American Federation of Labor, i. the Congress of Industrial Organizations, j. the American Communist Party, k. the America First movement and anti-Semitism in the United States

5. Evaluate the effectiveness of the New Deal programs enacted during the 1930s and the societal responses to those programs.

CONNECTICUT SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES FRAMEWORK

US-4. The 1920s, Great Depression, and New Deal

US.Eco.3.a. Analyze the ways in which government incentives and personal motivation influenced production and distribution under New Deal policies (e.g., Agricultural Adjustment Act, Tennessee Valley Authority Act, Civilian Conservation Corps, Federal Housing Administration).

US.Eco.6.a. Explain potential approaches to stabilize markets in response to the Great Depression (e.g., plans by Herbert Hoover, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Huey Long, and the American Communist Party).

US.Eco.8.a. Describe the possible consequences, both intended and unintended, of government policies to address social and economic problems during the Great Depression (e.g., role of the Federal government, banking practices, inequitable access to benefits, migration, environmental impacts, social safety net).

NEW JERSEY STUDENT LEARNING STANDARDS - SOCIAL STUDIES

Era 10. The Great Depression and World War II: The New Deal (1929–1945)

6.1.12.CivicsPR.10.a: Analyze how the Supreme Court has interpreted the Constitution to define and expand individual rights and use evidence to document the long-term impact of these decisions on the protection of civil and human rights.

6.1.12.CivicsPR.10.b: Assess the effectiveness of governmental policies enacted during the New Deal period in protecting the welfare of individuals (i.e., FDIC, NLRB, and Social Security).

6.1.12.EconNE.10.a: Evaluate the effectiveness of economic regulations and standards established during this time period in combating the Great Depression.



6.1.12.HistoryCA.10.a: Explain how Franklin Roosevelt and other key individuals, including minorities and women, shaped the core ideologies and policies of the New Deal (i.e., Mary McLeod Bethune, Frances Perkins, and Eleanor Roosevelt).

6.1.12.HistoryCA.10.b: Use a variety of sources from multiple perspectives to determine the extent to which New Deal public works and arts programs impacted New Jersey, the nation, and the environment.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 6: Power, Authority and Governance

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences



or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

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CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the

organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.



RESOURCES

HANDOUTS

- Handout - New Deal Songs
- Handout - New Deal Primary Sources
- Handout - Part 2 New Songs Analysis
- Gallery Walk - Part 2 New Deal Songs
- Handout - Supreme Court Cases
- Handout - Create a Radio Broadcast