A PARTY IN PERIL: FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT, THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY, AND THE CIRCULAR LETTER OF 1924

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The Democratic Party suffered its worst electoral defeat in 1924, when compromise candidate John Davis survived a brutal convention in New York City only to be soundly defeated by incumbent President Calvin Coolidge. It was a demoralizing defeat for the party, and Franklin D. Roosevelt seized this fraught moment to take the reins as party leader and begin reforming the party to fit his vision. Roosevelt composed a “Circular Letter,” listing five fundamental principles that the Democratic Party should unite behind, and sent it to delegates and party leaders throughout the country. Whether he believed that the responses would simply endorse his suggestions and reorient him as party leader or not, he received a variety of feedback, demonstrating the deep fissures within the Democratic Party and a distinct lack of direction or shared vision.

This dissertation focuses on the convergence of two fortunes: the Democratic Party, going through one of its darkest periods, and Franklin Roosevelt, recovering from his tragic illness and trying to reclaim his position in the party. My dissertation provides the most significant examination of the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter of 1924. Analyzing the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter of 1924 provides an opportunity to understand a party and politician in peril: the Democratic Party at its lowest moment since the Civil War; Franklin Roosevelt at a personal and political crossroads; and how Roosevelt’s Circular Letter and responses provided a way for both the party and his political career to return to prominence.
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“Defeat should serve as well as victory to shake the soul and let the glory out.” Al Gore quoted poet Edwin Markham in his concession speech in 2000, and I held on to these words. They have helped inform my interest in politics, both the winners, and more importantly, the lessons that can be gained when a politician or party are forced to figure out what they stand for.

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APPENDIX A. CIRCULAR LETTER CHART
A PARTY IN PERIL: FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT, THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY, AND
THE CIRCULAR LETTER OF 1924

“I belong to no organized party; I am a Democrat,” the famed humorist Will Rogers said in the 1920s, and his joke was entirely apt. During the decade, the Democratic Party was in a complete tailspin, unable to find secure footing in a changing political landscape, and worse still, facing a well-organized and well-funded party in their opposition, the Republican Party. The party suffered its worst electoral defeat in 1924, when compromise candidate John Davis survived a brutal convention in New York City only to be soundly defeated by incumbent President Calvin Coolidge, with the insurgent Progressive Party’s Robert LaFollette eating into Democratic strongholds. It was a demoralizing defeat for the party, and Franklin D. Roosevelt seized this fraught moment to take the reins as party leader and begin reforming the party to fit his vision.

Franklin Roosevelt composed a “Circular Letter,” listing five fundamental principles that the Democratic Party should unite behind, and sent it to delegates and party leaders throughout the country. Whether he believed that the responses would simply endorse his suggestions and reorient him as party leader or not, he received a variety of feedback, demonstrating the deep fissures within the Democratic Party and a distinct lack of direction or shared vision.

In this dissertation, I argue that Franklin Roosevelt used the responses to reclaim a position of leadership and to begin charting a restructuring of the Democratic Party. Roosevelt started this process by seeking to define the Democratic Party principles and succeeded in developing a winning coalition for his electoral success. This dissertation is unique in the textual analysis of the correspondence between Roosevelt and the delegates, providing a thorough examination of the concerns of the party faithful and one of the major Democratic leaders at this
critical moment. This analysis provides readers with a sense of how divisions within the Democratic Party were created, erupted, and ultimately, soothed to allow the Democrats to be successful in the future, with Franklin Roosevelt at the helm. While most political histories privilege the actions and words of the powerful, this dissertation also provides insight into the membership of a political party at the pivotal moment when parties began reorienting their focus on their constituency. In inviting the opinions, suggestions, and complaints of Democratic delegates and leaders, Franklin Roosevelt opened up a dialogue, making the party stronger by taking stock of its strengths and weaknesses, and ensuring his own importance to the party’s unity. I argue that the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter is essential to understanding both the Democratic Party at this critical juncture and Franklin Roosevelt at a crossroads in his political life.

The Circular Letter emerged less than one month after the disastrous election, and the results of the letter showed a variety of criticism towards party leaders. Interestingly, the Circular Letter was rejected by many of the major party leaders, with Roosevelt’s criticisms seeming opportunistic, and Roosevelt’s own political footing anything but paramount (to date, he was the defeated nominee for vice president in 1920 and had only been elected to two terms in the state legislature in New York, prior to his appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Navy by Woodrow Wilson).

At this pivotal time, the Democratic Party was deeply fractured and poorly organized, adding to the divisions and poor party performance. The Circular Letter found real resonance with party leaders and organizers at the state and local level who had scarce opportunities to register their opinions about the growing schisms within the party. These men and women toiled for electoral success, many of them using their own money, only to have the Democratic Party
apparatus ignore or, in the case of Southern Democrats, take their votes for granted when the
general election season reemerged. In Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter, they found a way to
express their frustrations, their successes, and their visions for the party’s future. In reading
them, Roosevelt found a way to unite the party and create a substantial political coalition.
Franklin Roosevelt responded to these Circular Letter responses by pushing for party unity and
seeking to develop a shared ideology. Roosevelt studied and examined the roots of the
Democratic Party and began encouraging Democrats to develop policy that would identify them
as distinctly different from Republicans, most evident when he was party leader, candidate, and
eventually, president.

Roosevelt’s campaign strategy in 1932 and his New Deal administration reflected a
commitment to defining and affecting a Democratic brand markedly different from the confusing
blend of William Jennings Bryan populism and Woodrow Wilson idealism that had dominated
the party in its heyday, and the marked conservatism that James Cox and John Davis attempted
in 1920 and 1924 (with very little space separating the conservative Democrats from
Republicans). Roosevelt’s definition of the Democratic Party in the Circular Letter, focusing on
the “good of the average citizen through the free will of the electorate,” stood in contrast to a
Republican Party concerned only with a “self-appointed aristocracy of wealth,” themes he would
emphasize and develop as he redeveloped his political career. The Franklin Roosevelt Circular
Letter marked a clear line of separation between a disorganized and incoherent Democratic Party
and the making of the eventual New Deal Democrats. The party was so closely identified with
Roosevelt that his Congressional supporters could push through unprecedented legislation and
those who disagreed with Roosevelt’s vision of the party would be shed.

The Circular Letter also, not coincidentally, signals the return to prominence for Franklin
Roosevelt after his polio attack and intense recuperation. Roosevelt, after battling his illness, paralysis, and public perceptions about his physical disability, triumphed only after providing a remarkable effort of party leadership. Roosevelt would not cede his leadership position until his death, by then altering the party and its place on the political spectrum for a generation.

Roosevelt himself never stated his motivations in writing the Circular Letter and in trying to assert himself as one of the party brokers is not entirely clear. In this dissertation, I chart Franklin Roosevelt’s unlikely return to prominence, and how his personal struggle informed his push to reform the Democratic Party into an electoral, and personal, success. Franklin Roosevelt’s political career was built on personal connection and being cautiously calculating in his maneuvering. In the Circular Letter, Roosevelt staked his future on the notion that he could serve as a leader and unifier, and his political career was built on the success. The Circular Letter must be viewed as the turning point for both the Democratic Party and Franklin Roosevelt, and the melding of two political fortunes; the Democratic Party’s success would be tied to the leadership’s ability to convey understanding and connection with the voters and party faithful.

The impact of the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter has not been sufficiently covered in detail in any source, and I intend here to correct this omission from the record. The Circular Letter is vital to understanding the Democratic Party in the interregnum between Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt’s presidencies, as the party fluctuated between despair and defeat. Analyses of the three elections of the 1920s record the Democratic candidates as soundly defeated by a combination of a lack of party organization, divisive political issues, and increasing voter indifference, dealt fatal blows before any campaign could commence. Over the course of the 1920s, the Democratic Party would be divided by (but not exclusively): ongoing debate over the protective tariff; new restrictions on immigration into the United States; the
debate over the United States’ entry into the League of Nations; the enforcement of Prohibition; and the formation and Democratic associations with the latest iteration of the Ku Klux Klan. In addition to these were ongoing and new tensions between defined factions within the party: urban vs. rural; North vs. South; conservative vs. progressive; and wet vs. dry factions, to name the most obvious. My dissertation details these factions and issues, with a particular focus on the responses of Democratic delegates to Franklin Roosevelt and his efforts to remedy the divisions.

I have researched the papers of the failed Democratic presidential candidates of the 1920s—James Cox, John W. Davis, and Al Smith—to ascertain how they viewed the Democratic Party and their electoral defeats. This will stand in contrast with the way that Franklin Roosevelt, a rising star in the party (though recently paralyzed and panicked about his political future), viewed the future of the party and its electoral prospects. The Circular Letter represents a turning point, in providing access and opportunity for delegates to register their discord with a party leader, and with Roosevelt’s willingness to reexamine the party’s direction.

The Democratic Party in the 1920s has been covered in recent historical scholarship, with a particular emphasis on the relationship between party leaders and ideology. My dissertation will be the first to focus in great detail on the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter, and the responses of the Democratic Party delegates, detailing an emphasis on the relationship between the Democratic Party of the 1920s, their party faithful, and the voting public at large. Frank Kent’s *The Democratic Party*, Robert Rutland’s *The Democrats*, and Jules Witcover’s *Party of the People* provide a comprehensive understanding of the Democratic Party’s history and origins, while Jeff Taylor’s *Where Did the Party Go?* and David Burner’s *Politics of Provincialism* chart the Democratic Party’s ideological development. While these books provided a comprehensive look at the party’s formation and its ideological identity crisis, the
discussion of the Circular Letter is essential to understanding how the party operated organizationally, and not solely through the prism of its leaders. This dissertation also presents an organizational element to Franklin Roosevelt’s rise, viewing the New Deal Democratic coalition as a product of Roosevelt’s fundamental and developed understanding of the party from its base, insight he would have never gained without the Circular Letter of 1924.

Similarly, while there are countless resources detailing the rise of Franklin Roosevelt, none detail the Circular Letter and the impact it had on his gubernatorial and presidential bids. There were several fundamental points of inquiry, with the secondary source material largely emanating from these foci. The first was a focus on Franklin Roosevelt’s biography and political and ideological framework. Both lines were of equally vital concern to attempting to understand Roosevelt’s rationale behind writing the Circular Letter (both as it related to his political position and future and his return from grave illness). Several of the books were straight-forward Franklin Roosevelt biographies, consulting many of the same primary sources as in this dissertation. Frank Freidel’s *Franklin D. Roosevelt* series (stretching three volumes: *The Apprenticeship* (1952) charted his early life; *The Ordeal* (1954) covered his illness and the 1920s; and *The Triumph* (1956) focused on his presidency), Kenneth Davis’ *FDR: The Beckoning of Destiny*, James McGregor Burns’ *Roosevelt* (1956), Ted Morgan’s *FDR: A Biography* (1985), H.W. Brands’ *Traitor to His Class* (2009), and Geoffrey Ward’s *A First-Class Temperament* (1985) were the most comprehensive in orienting the early life and episodes that formed his social stature prior to his governorship and presidency. These historians ran into the same problem as I: reading Roosevelt’s correspondence and records does not make him definitively knowable, but certainly provide an insight into how Roosevelt wanted to portray himself.

In these books, the 1924 Circular Letter was referenced largely in terms of Roosevelt
attempting to keep his fledgling public profile visible, but there were scant details (each book referenced Roosevelt’s letter to Charles Murphy, summarizing the responses) of the letter itself, depriving readers of a pivotal moment in Roosevelt’s political development. What these books did provide was a detailed view of an unmoored and unfocused man who felt politics was his calling, but did not yet have the direction to devote his energies fully. Burns and Freidel had the benefit of operating largely in the wake of Roosevelt’s documents becoming public, while Morgan and Ward provided a more critical examination of Roosevelt’s private life. Brands presented Roosevelt as a country squire who dabbled in politics, and found his calling. This dissertation, in large part, continues that narrative, demonstrating how Roosevelt found his political footing at this turbulent moment and began charting a political future for himself and his party.

All of these books covered the same terrain: Roosevelt’s lonely childhood; his over-eagerness to fit in at school with boys his own age; his fraught relationship and marriage to Eleanor; his service in the Navy Department; his vice presidential bid; and his illness. What I have attempted to provide with these sources is a charting of Roosevelt’s development of a guiding political philosophy and attraction to political power, during these formative years. I view his illness and the approaching 1924 convention as an essential moment of clarity for Franklin Roosevelt, when he had to decide fully whether to become the country squire his mother had always envisioned for him, or a politician with a purpose. The Circular Letter was the decision that catapulted Roosevelt back into Democratic Party and presidential politics: understanding his motivation, the development of his political ideology, and his acting on the results of the letter are fundamental to understanding Franklin Roosevelt. 

1 While these books detailed Roosevelt’s polio attack and impending illness, Davis Houck and Amos Kiewe’s *Body Politic* and Richard Goldberg’s *The Making of Franklin D. Roosevelt* were essential to understanding
Kenneth Davis’ series on Roosevelt—*The Beckoning of Destiny* (2004), *The New York Years* (1985), and *The New Deal Years* (1986)—were unparalleled in the detail provided Roosevelt’s career in politics. While he paid attention to Roosevelt’s private life and political campaigns, like the others, Davis also provided the most thorough look at Roosevelt’s term as governor and the beginnings of his presidency. These books were invaluable, particularly when used in conjunction with the straight-forward biographies, at providing a look at Roosevelt’s interests and ability as an elected official, forced to put his promises into practice while balancing the various appeals and demands. His section on the Circular Letter, like other biographers, viewed the letter as a direct continuation of his efforts at Madison Square Garden to raise his profile but Davis did not detail the contents of either the letter or responses for insight into Roosevelt’s political understanding or development. That omission is corrected here, with the Circular Letter responses providing an urgency and direction for Roosevelt’s unfulfilled energy and sense of destiny.

The books of most value to this dissertation detail Franklin Roosevelt’s candidacy and rhetoric. Frank Freidel’s *A Rendezvous With Destiny* and *The Triumph*, Steve Neal’s *Happy Days are Here Again*, and Donald Ritchie’s *Electing FDR* focused on the 1932 presidential campaign, with particular emphasis on the Democratic National Committee, and the party’s organization in the run-up to what was seen as an inevitable win for Franklin Roosevelt. The books detail the specific approach Roosevelt made to specifically address visible issues and brand them in a uniquely Rooseveltian manner. This dissertation will contribute a comprehensive understanding of the development of the political acumen necessary for Roosevelt to take the reins of his party,

the political dynamics of Roosevelt’s illness, recovery, and perceptions of his disability. While my dissertation focused on Roosevelt’s political leadership, these books provided a wider view of the obstacles facing Roosevelt’s return, and make his 1924 convention address and Circular Letter later that year all the more vital.
demonstrated by his writing the Circular Letter and acting on the responses it engendered.

For discussions of the 1924 Democratic Convention, one work is paramount. Robert Murray’s *The 103rd Ballot* is unqualifiedly the most comprehensive resource on the tumultuous 1924 nominating convention. His analyses of the key figures and their actions—before, after, and especially throughout the convention—are without peer. As with most historical works dealing with political events, his focus is trained on the major political candidates and figures, with scant attention paid to the delegates or Democratic faithful in attendance. This dissertation seeks to include the party regulars in the narrative, providing a far broader understanding of how the party was viewed by its most loyal and active component, the everyday people who worked to elect the Democratic Party and were fighting to keep it relevant.

Regarding the impact of creation of a new party focus, three works stand out in their analysis: Kristi Anderson’s *The Creation of a Democratic Majority*, David Lawrence’s *The Collapse of the Democratic Presidential Majority*, and David Burner’s *The Politics of Provincialism*. These texts provided the framework for understanding the dynamics of the Democratic Party during the elections following 1924: how the party’s base constituency shifted and how the party leaders, most importantly Franklin Roosevelt, adapted to the transformed political scene. In short, these texts illuminate how Roosevelt and other Democrats put the Circular Letter responses to work in creating a sustainable Democratic majority.

This dissertation details the Democratic Party leaders’ decisions regarding key issues and the ideologies that governed them. I also analyze the party platforms and official materials, to show a correlation (or alteration) of a consensus party outlook with private candidate conveyance. There is sufficient scholarship on the formation of the New Deal as Franklin Roosevelt’s presidential policy for dealing with the Great Depression’s effects on employment
and abject poverty, but I focus on the effect that the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter had on refining Roosevelt’s conceptions of his party and examine his efforts to provide savvy branding for his political career by identifying voter concerns and demonstrating the utility of a party that reflects those concerns.

The most substantial works dealing with the Circular Letter were Douglas Craig’s *After Wilson* and Graham White’s *FDR and the Press*, but even they treated the Circular Letter in minimal fashion. Craig charted the organizational efforts of conservative Democrats in the period between Woodrow Wilson leaving office and Franklin Roosevelt returning to the White House. His discussion of the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter focused on the organizational discussions that Roosevelt included (having the national committee run year around, national fundraising, better communication, etc.), but not the responses that Roosevelt received from the delegates. White’s book focused on the relationship between Roosevelt and the press throughout his public life, with a particular emphasis on Roosevelt’s courting the press on his attempted return to politics. White discussed Roosevelt’s lifelong correspondence with Democratic leaders to remain in power, behind the scenes, throughout his recovery period, with the Circular Letter serving as the best example. This dissertation provides the necessary coverage of the responses to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the composition, responses, and impact of the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter. Rather than viewing this correspondence as incidental to Roosevelt’s rise, I view it as essential to viewing Roosevelt’s understanding of his party at its lowest point and informative to charting his assumption of Democratic Party leadership.

The bulk of the primary source research came from analyzing the official documents of Franklin Roosevelt, held at the Franklin Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York. In particular, I focused on Roosevelt’s correspondence in 1924 and the vast number of letters
collected in response to his Circular Letter, as reading Roosevelt’s policy proposal and the responses were essential to understanding how Roosevelt communicated his ideas. While other scholars have highlighted specific letters, this is the first comprehensive analysis of the responses to the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter, providing a comprehensive understanding of the Democratic Party of 1924 from the people who were most in tune with the party’s problems. In addition, I analyzed the public papers of the three Democratic candidates of the 1920s: James Cox (held at Wright State University, in Dayton, Ohio), John W. Davis (held at Yale University, in New Haven, Connecticut), and Al Smith (held at New York State Archives in Albany). These provided a better view of how the other Democratic candidates communicated with constituents and other leaders. I also researched the public papers of two Democratic National Committee Chairmen: Cordell Hull (whose papers are held at the Tennessee State Archives in Nashville) and John Jacob Raskob (held at the Hagley Library in Wilmington, Delaware). In these documents, I was able to analyze how the candidates and chairmen corresponded with the voting public, how they enumerated the public policies of the Democratic Party, and the changing ways that they viewed the fortunes of the Party.

In addition, this dissertation contains secondary source coverage, with newspaper articles charting the 1924 Democratic Convention and impact of the Circular Letter as it was relayed in the media. This was essential to uncovering how the Democratic Party’s evolution was discussed in the national media and what it looked like to voters across the country. I also consulted Democratic Party publications, including the Democratic National Committee’s Women’s Voters Manual and the Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention. These records provided an invaluable understanding of how the party branded itself and the way the party communicated with its leadership and party faithful.
This dissertation focuses on the convergence of two fortunes: the Democratic Party, going through one of its darkest periods, and Franklin Roosevelt, recovering from his tragic illness and trying to reclaim his position in the party. The fortunes of both became inextricably linked in 1924, with Roosevelt seeking to understand his party and provide a successful future for both his political career and his party. The dissertation contains five chapters. The first chapter analyzes the Democratic Party of the 1920s, focusing on the party’s roots, the major figures of influence, the loose organizational structure and the divisive issues leading up to the disastrous 1924 Democratic Convention. In particular, I analyze the major issues that correspondents of the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter highlighted as divisive, and detail the roots of those fissures.

The second chapter focuses on Franklin Roosevelt’s ascent in the 1920s. I provide a biography charting Roosevelt’s political rise with a specific focus on Roosevelt’s conceptions of the Democratic Party and his association with the party. This chapter also includes the details of his polio attack, paralysis, and the aftermath, setting the stage for his return as a party leader in 1924.

The third chapter provides a detailed description of the disastrous 1924 Democratic National Convention. The convention’s proceedings, and Franklin Roosevelt’s role throughout the event, provide context for understanding the necessity of the Circular Letter and Roosevelt’s interest in sustaining his public profile. In particular, I focus on the sectional division and meltdown over the Ku Klux Klan, the nominating chaos and compromise, and its impact on the party’s electoral prospects in its wake.

The fourth chapter examines the Circular Letter, from Franklin Roosevelt’s motivations in writing the document to the responses of party members. There has never been a thorough
examination of the Circular Letter responses, and I present a comprehensive analysis of the responses by major topic that they address. This chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the issues and divisions threatening the Democratic Party in 1924.

My fifth chapter charts the effects of the Circular Letter on the Democratic Party. In particular, I focus on Roosevelt’s replies to some of the Letter responses, his efforts to arrange a meeting of the Democratic leadership, his focus on providing an ideological framework for understanding the Democratic Party as distinct from the Democratic Party, and Roosevelt’s own utilization of the Letter’s responses in his campaigns as governor and president.

My dissertation provides the most significant examination of the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter of 1924. In addition, the dissertation represents a significant addition to the way historians have understood and interpreted the Democratic defeat and Republican triumphs of the 1920s, and the formation of Franklin Roosevelt’s political identity, his re-entry into the national political scene following his paralysis, and ultimately, his triumph at partisan branding. While previous scholars have devoted significant attention to Franklin Roosevelt’s interpersonal correspondence, this letter and circumstances have been under-reported. The dissertation provides the added dimension of offering the responses that the Circular Letter instigated.

Analyzing the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter of 1924 provides an opportunity to understand a party and politician in peril: the Democratic Party at its lowest moment since the Civil War; Franklin Roosevelt at a personal and political crossroads; and how Roosevelt’s Circular Letter and responses provided a way for both the party and his political career to return to prominence.
CHAPTER I. DEMOCRATS DIVIDED: THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY OF THE 1920s

The Democratic Party was literally made for contention and disparate voices. For decades, party leaders wore their ability to provide as broad a base as possible for divergent interests as a badge of honor. Where the Republican Party could claim some semblance of a national brand, the Democratic Party was marked by a proudly region-specific loyalty, with the Southern and Western Democrats increasingly at odds with their Northern counterparts. The Republican Party of the 1920s hammered out their differences behind closed doors and nominated candidates at organized and family-friendly conventions. The Democratic Party, contrarily, allowed for the 1924 convention to devolve into a prolonged, two-week nightmare, with nothing but hurt feelings, destroyed ambitions, and a battered nominee emerging from the fracas. In this low moment, Franklin Roosevelt seized the opportunity to both reintroduce himself as a political player and reframe the Democratic Party as a progressive party, independent in every way from their Republican opposition.

This chapter will examine the tensions at play as the Democratic Party met at the 1924 Democratic Convention in New York City. In this chapter, I examine the history of the Democratic Party from its inception and early tensions, struggles for identity amid Jefferson and Jackson’s supporters, reactions during and after the Civil War, the permutations that came at the end of the nineteenth century with the Populist Party and William Jennings Bryan, and the plethora of political and social tensions that marked the first two decades of the twentieth century. Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter, sent after the disastrous 1924 convention and election, provided a rare glimpse into the private thinking of Democrats from across the country, concerned with issues of regional specificity and wrestling with their own ideas about ideology and what their party truly represented.
I argue that the Democratic Party was divided in three major and distinct ways: by region (South/West vs North); by ideology (conservative vs. liberal, and increasingly, progressive); and according to major issues (the protective tariff, immigration restriction, the League of Nations, prohibition, and reaction to the Ku Klux Klan). The party lacked real leadership in the guise of a consistent forming ideology, interaction between local, state, and national party players, and a strong governing body and leader. These tensions were only magnified by infrequent opportunities to register opinion and direction, rendering the national conventions as platforms for hostility and rancor, and not the unifying of platform and message for which they were intended. This chapter will examine all of these factors at play when the Democratic Party devolved at the Madison Square Garden convention and setting the stage for the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter and Roosevelt’s response.

**Roots of Discord in the Democratic Party**

One of the most interesting facets of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s correspondence with voters in the aftermath of the 1924 debacle was a shared interest among respondents to find shared roots that they could agree upon and form an identity around. While most Democrats cited the Jefferson/Jackson lineage, they paid scant attention to how the party of those early years functioned in relation to the government and their opposition. The Civil War, of course, complicated the way that Democrats viewed themselves, and Reconstruction remained a source of great tension, even in the 1920s. The war and aftermath created an odd juxtaposition of Southerners who prided the states’-rights efforts of their regionally-focused party versus an influx of immigrants and others ostracized from the Republicans in control in major cities. There was also a great dearth of powerful and acceptable national Democratic figures: William Jennings Bryan and Woodrow Wilson were polarizing figures with loaded names and legacies in
the 1920s, the party still unsure of how to calibrate the blending of progressivism and Populism with the party’s history and major figures. A number of the respondents to Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter even invoked the restrained legacy of Grover Cleveland, demonstrating how desperate Democrats were to rally around a shared set of heroes. That the same party could serve as home to figures as disparate and disagreeable as Cleveland, Bryan, and Wilson demonstrated the depth of the Democratic Party’s identity crisis in 1924.

**Democratic identity.**

One of the immediate developments of the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter of 1924 was Roosevelt’s personal interest in charting the history of the Democratic Party. There is very little to indicate why Roosevelt considered himself a Democrat when it would have been natural to identify as a Republican, especially as he was situated in upstate New York and shared a famous last name with the Republican president (as detailed in Chapter II). Woodrow Wilson and the Democratic Party were the beneficiaries of Republican Party rancor in the 1912 presidential election, and Roosevelt, always drawn to powerful personalities, quickly affiliated himself with Wilson’s blend of states-rights advocacy and Theodore Roosevelt’s brand of progressivism. Wilson recognized the rising star with the familiar last name in a position as his Assistant Secretary of the Navy; Roosevelt served the full term without much distinction and was not personally close to Wilson or his administration. When Wilson’s presidency ended, Roosevelt was nominated as vice president, again capitalizing on his famous last name. He played the role of running mate well, espousing James Cox’s views, but offering very little of his own ideas. His nominating speech for Al Smith at the 1924 Democratic Convention was effusive in his support for Smith, but Roosevelt gave no indication as to why he thought Smith was a better candidate to carry the Democratic banner.
It is clear that Franklin Roosevelt considered the Democratic Party in terms of personality politics, offering much of his own intuition and belief in the individuals he associated with, but with very little sense of how the Democratic Party functioned or what its role was. Franklin responded to some of the delegates who offered opinions of his Circular Letter, but clearly was confused by the ideas about Democratic Party ideology or what it offered in opposition to the Republican Party. Shortly after receiving the Circular Letter responses, Roosevelt began to think about the Democratic Party’s ideological foundations, and then Roosevelt started to identify and shape the Democratic Party for the future.

**Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democracy.**

Indeed, the Democratic Party offered a difficult and complex history to unpack. Democrats at the 1924 Convention viewed large banners of their two major contributors, Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson on the platform stage. Respondents to the Circular Letter frequently invoked either or both names in encouraging the Democratic Party to return to its roots: Jefferson founded the party and gave it the agrarian roots, making him a hero of Southern Democrats over a century later, while Jackson crafted the idea of the “party of the people,” expanding the party’s influence among the working class and immigrants, an association that never really went away.

Thomas Jefferson founded the party almost in spite of himself. At first, he and James Madison were merely providing a platform to voice displeasure at the execution of the early presidency and, in particular, Alexander Hamilton’s broad conceptions of his own power as Secretary of the Treasury. Their supporters formed “Democratic-Republican societies” in major cities, and Jefferson and Madison developed a brand of opposition to the Federalists.² For

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Jefferson and Madison, Hamilton’s loose interpretation of the Constitution was incredibly personal, but opposition voices in the early 1790s were deemed unconscionable, forcing the “Republicans” (Jefferson and Madison were enamored with Roman history and the republican ideal) to meet in secrecy in Philadelphia, then the nation’s capital.3 As his political career grew, and he served as vice president and eventually third president, Jefferson kept his focus on checking Adams’ and other Federalists’ royalist tendencies and federal power expansion.4

Jefferson’s presidency and the Republican Party leadership passed without discussion or real opposition between friends and fellow Virginians, from Jefferson to James Madison and James Monroe. According to Noble E. Cunningham in The Jeffersonian Republicans in Power, the opposition for Republicans during this period was internal, as Republicans struggled with the relationship of Congressmen to their party and how the national party should be reflected on a state and local level, but the party was unrivaled electorally.5 For Jefferson and his successors, their role as executive meant largely maintaining the status quo, allowing the planting class in agriculture-dominated states (Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe all considered themselves farmers) to maintain this way of life without any federal impediment. Throughout his presidency, Jefferson stressed the concept of moderation and political tolerance, but his Republican followers were not interested in either concept.6

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6 Samuel Rhea Gammon, The Presidential Campaign of 1832 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1922),
In a presaging move, Jefferson moved quickly to secure the Louisiana Purchase and sent scouts to document the land quality. Jefferson’s concern was in continuing the balance between agricultural independence of future individual states in this new territory, remaining one step ahead of the growing cities of the North. Much of the early nineteenth century for the Republicans was defined by tensions between Republicans in the Northeast (in particular, New York and Massachusetts) and the South.⁷ The two economies were polarized and led to a break in party unity as primary economic and cultural concerns became untethered.⁸

While Jefferson personally abhorred the idea of political parties, his influence was undeniable, and for the following century, Jefferson’s legacy would serve as a guide. Jeff Taylor charted twelve distinct tenets of Jeffersonian Democracy in Where Did the Party Go?: democracy over aristocracy; political decentralization; strict constructionism (of the Constitution); opposition to centralized banking; legislative preeminence over executive; suspicion of the judiciary; protection of civil liberties; ethnic (notably, not racial) inclusiveness; frugal spending; low taxation; pacifism; and isolationism.⁹

Jefferson once wrote about the primary distinction that marked his followers:

“Men by their constitutions are naturally divided into two parties: 1-those who fear and distrust the people and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes; 2-those who identify themselves with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and consider them as the most wise depoctor of the public interest. In every country, these two parties exist and in every one where they are free to think, speak, and write, they will declare themselves. Call them therefore liberals and serviles, Jacobins and ultras, Whigs and Tories, Republicans and Federalists, aristocrats and Democrats, or by whatever name you please, they are the same

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⁷ Willentz, Rise of American Democracy, 143-144.
parties still and pursue the same object. The last appellation of aristocrats and Democrats is the true one expressing the essence of all.”

Jefferson was also responsible for the slogan of Democratic Party platforms for decades to follow: “Equal Rights for All, Special Privileges for None.” Jefferson’s wrestling with his ideology did not mean that all followers followed every tenet, or that Jefferson could claim ideological purity; indeed, Jefferson himself had contradictory reappraisals of positions and was ultimately a politician and political practitioner. But as a consistent ideology, or set of beliefs about governing, these tenets informed Jeffersonian Democrats in subsequent decades.

In 1824, the Republican Party faced complete dissolution, as each region had a nominee for the presidency, and the voting interests of the South began to irrevocably differ from Northern voting interests. General Andrew Jackson was different from the first five presidents, especially in terms of origins, emerging from a poor and orphaned childhood to rise through the military and political ranks to take power. What he lacked in gravitas or governing bona fides, he made up for in attracting political acolytes, ushering an era where devotion to party was a visible marker. Jackson won the popular vote in the 1824, but no candidate won the Electoral College majority. With the election thrown to the House of Representatives, Speaker Henry Clay arranged with John Quincy Adams to elect Adams in exchange appointment as Secretary of State. When word of the “corrupt bargain” leaked, Jackson’s followers immediately began the 1828 campaign, focused on the idea that the powerful in Washington were corrupt, and the

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11 Hofstadter, *American Political Tradition*, 24-25, 38. Indeed, while running for president in 1800, Jefferson offered an ambitious platform, featuring eight tenets: democracy over aristocracy; states’ rights; lower government spending; lower taxes; trade with all nations but no standing alliances; no standing army; protection of civil liberties; and ethnic inclusiveness. Taylor, *Where Did the Party Go?*, 5.
answer to reform would be an outsider. With this, too, the Republican split was made official and supporters of Andrew Jackson declared themselves officially as “Democrats,” diametrically opposed to the John Quincy Adams National Republicans.

Andrew Jackson and his supporters began developing a message to cater to voters who felt that the federal government did not reflect their nation or its governing principles. Importantly, Jackson and his supporters also positioned him as a national political leader, and not merely the representative of a single-minded region or issue. With his election in 1828, Jackson’s followers heralded him as different from his predecessors. By promising accessibility and politics for the common man and actively pushing to extend universal suffrage to all white men, regardless of education, occupation, or property ownership, Jackson was different from the Republicans who came before. Jackson also attacked the climate that pervaded Washington and allowed for the “corrupt bargain” that undid his previous election, and he pushed for measures to limit Congressmen and Cabinet members from pursuing the presidency or accepting appointments based on electoral support.

Both Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democracy included strict constructionism and adherence to the spirit of the founding documents. Jackson’s presidency differed by eliminating the class hierarchy inherent in the Jeffersonian focus on a well-educated voting public in favor of

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providing access to all men. Jackson also focused on enhancing the powers of the presidency and executive branch. While his Jeffersonian predecessors vetoed only laws that they thought violated the Constitution, Jackson wielded his veto power to eliminate legislation that he thought over-extended Congress’ reach or that he simply disagreed with (the best example was Jackson deciding that the Bank of the United States charter was unconstitutional and refusing to compromise until it was destroyed). Both men feared unchecked federal growth, especially considering their political rivals and the approach those men took to newfound power.\textsuperscript{16}

Andrew Jackson also took a flexible approach to his presidency. While both men campaigned with specific ideas about democracy and the role of the federal government, they were called to adapt as external and internal forces necessitated. The president used his appointment powers to create factions loyal to his cause, with patronage as currency. Jackson also personally worked to secure the death of the Second Bank of the United States, continuing in Jefferson’s tradition in opposing a federalized and centralized financial institution.\textsuperscript{17} Also, like Jefferson, Jackson looked to new territories to expand and continue the productivity of the Southern states and Southerners’ way of living, a process that included slavery. The ongoing contention in Florida as Jackson authorized the removal of Native Americans was an example of this singular focus of Jackson’s expansion, which neatly fit into his plans to pacify Southerners and demonstrate his and the federal government’s favoring whites over non-whites in the South.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{18} Willentz, \textit{Rise of American Democracy}, 327.
Organizationally, the Democrats founded themselves as an independent party in time for the 1832 election. The Democrats of 1832 ushered in the idea of a political party convention, which had only been convened in recent years for the Anti-Masons and National Republicans in 1831. When Calhoun resigned as vice president, Jackson opened the discussion of his running-mate to the convention, and the accessibility of decision-making for the party became a governing hallmark. In a move that would cause chaos in later conventions, the Democrats passed a rule requiring two-thirds majority for the winning nominee. To their mind, this guaranteed that the victor would be the consensus candidate of the entire party, sending the nominee to the general election buoyed by the support of his entire party. In the 1920s, this would turn out far less amicably.19

The Civil War and Reconstruction.

One of the other long-simmering tensions that were evident on the Madison Square Garden floor was the aftermath of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Southern and Northern Democrats had never been reconciled after the war and the impending Reconstruction, and instead, the party continued to fissure with competing interests and constituencies, uniting only on the convention floors in great spectacles.

In the 1850s, the Democratic Party served primarily as the mouthpiece of Southern plantation owners and their loyal supporters. Martin Van Buren was a great steward of Jackson’s legacy, creating a political juggernaut out of the Democratic Party, with campaign parades, speeches, and celebrations never seen before or since. In this era, party identity was paramount, and, especially in the South, it dictated how much power an individual could attain. Party

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identity remained the primary personal identifier for much of the nineteenth century, until the party machinery began to wane and voting reforms ushered in a more independent electorate. The Republican Party emerged out of the ashes of the Whig and Know-Nothing Parties and focused almost exclusively on eliminating slavery in the nation. While there were still Democrats in the North, they were plagued with constant debates over the merits of slavery. Southern Democrats had no comparable opposition.

Southern Democrats worked to ensure that the federal government did not have any say on the issue of slavery; they did not sponsor or introduce legislation pro-slavery in flavor, but fought instead to keep the issue from being discussed at all. The more vociferous Southern Democrats, nicknamed “Fire-Eaters,” became incompatible with Northern Democrats. They advocated opposition to federal laws prohibiting slavery and slowly began pushing towards outright violent rebellion. Both Presidents Pierce and Buchanan were politically inert and easily influenced, doing very little to ameliorate the dramatic tensions in the country and focusing on the actions of congressional Democrats who were loyal to the administrations.

Buchanan’s disinterest in re-election allowed the Fire-Eaters to wage war against Northern Democrats, leading to the disastrous 1860 convention held in Charleston. There, large sections of Southern Democrats stormed out of the convention to protest an accommodationist platform sponsored by Northern Democrats and meant to mimic Republicans. The Southern Democrats named their own nominee, splitting the Democratic support and delivering the White

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House to the Republican Abraham Lincoln. The party’s efficacy was severely limited throughout the impending Civil War: Northern Democrats were forced to limit their criticism of the Union’s progress and Southern Democrats either joined the Confederacy or risked their lives and future.  

In the aftermath of the Civil War, Democrats faced another moment of crisis. Radical Republicans vilified Northern Democrats, forcing them to side with retribution against the defeated Confederates or risk being cast as traitors. Radical Republicans wanted former Confederates barred from voting and holding offices in the government, demands eased by President Johnson being far more interested in moving forward than in punishing Southerners. Former Confederates still despised Republicans, naturally, and quickly recovered the ardor of the Democratic Party and control of the South. The White Leagues and Red Shirts emerged to enforce anti-black sentiment and keep freed slaves from exercising the right to vote, and the Democratic Party dominated the South once again. Radical Republicans did not easily attract voters, and the majority of incoming immigrants fell into the Democratic ranks, the makings of a Democratic majority in the cities already in evidence.

The 1868 presidential election was far closer than expected, leading Republicans to push to extend voting rights to African Americans with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment. Southern Democrats immediately instituted measures to prohibit African-Americans from voting. The White Leagues and Red Shirts combined with the Ku Klux Klan to terrorize freed slaves and anyone who supported them, holding the South hostage while Democrats swept back into control. African-Americans were prohibited from voting, but also suffered destruction of

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property and vigilante lynchings throughout the end of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{27} According to J. Morgan Kousser, the social structure of the postbellum South relied on “the unqualified belief in the innate inferiority or even inhumaness of the Negro, the contradictory impulses to violence and paternalism, the acceptance of the hegemony of a tiny white elite.”\textsuperscript{28} Southern Democrats worked to ensure that this status quo remained in place.

The party was further split with the emergence of “Redeemers,” Democrats who sought to rid the South of Northern influence, especially Republican “scalawags” and “carpetbaggers.” This represented the continued separation of Northern Democrats from their Southern compatriots: Redeemers, like Northern “Bourbons,” pushed for civil service reform to limit patronage and corruption, the trading currency for Republicans in power in the North. But Redeemers also worked to consolidate power by limiting voting in the South to white men, extending the old planter class and “redeeming” the South. All of this fit in with the “New Departure,” an understanding that for the Democrats to be politically viable again, they had to make the issues of the Civil War and Reconstruction secondary to moderation and economic development, if only in rhetoric.\textsuperscript{29}

The regional schism evident in the 1924 Democratic Convention and aftermath was evidenced beginning in the Reconstruction-era Democrats. Southern Democrats shared two competing goals. The first was the most prominent and immediate: rebuilding and sustaining an


\textsuperscript{28} Kousser, \textit{Shaping of Southern Politics}, 16.

agrarian economy, despite losing the slave labor that benefited farmers and plantations. With the Northern factories flourishing and the Republican-dominated Congress and executive branch and patronage all aimed at promoting business in the North, it was natural that Southerners felt not only forgotten and neglected, but actively victimized. The economy quickly turned to tenant farming and sharecropping, with freed slaves and poor white tenant farmers living in dependence to the planting elite, similar to the way it had been before the war. The second factor was restoring the political hierarchy that preceded the war, which included restoring voting privileges to men who joined the Confederacy and eliminating the Republicans who had invaded the South to take advantage of the confusion and disarray.

With Republicans as a shared enemy (and Radical Republicans, in particular), Democrats continued to broaden their base to appeal to more white men by crafting regional and state-specific party platforms that just so happened to vote Democratic each general election. In states like Alabama, the “Conservative Party” attracted former Confederates and Democrats, but also former Whigs who hated the Republicans in Congress but also did not adhere to their old rival, the Democrats, and their policies. For decades, the party called itself either the “Conservative Party” or “Conservative and Democratic” and devoted energy to creating voting policies that would reinforce the racial hierarchy so important to Southern Democrats. Northern Democrats and Redeemers focused on economic policies, pushing for the party to go after Republican corruption as a guiding principle. This became extremely attractive, particularly as the Panic of 1873 set in. A new brand of Democrats, called “Bourbon Democrats” (again, a derisive

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nickname at its inception, meant to invoke the fated French dynasty, but later adopted by its followers), focused on criticizing the Grant administration and political corruption in the major cities. This was a tenuous enterprise, as Democrats in major cities relied on the political bosses and machinery to make new Democrats out of incoming immigrants, expanding the base even more. Bourbon Democrats could afford to be critical of corruption, pointing to the scandal-plagued Grant administration as systemic of Republicanism in general, while devoting themselves to a more idealized version of Democracy and governance. The Bourbons took the mantle of the former Jacksonian Democrats, espousing *laissez-faire* economic policies (anti-tariff, anti-bimetallism) and denouncing corrupt government. Samuel Tilden and Grover Cleveland were both elected governors of New York by pushing the Bourbon platform, presiding over relatively quiet governorships, and positioning themselves as Democratic Party leaders.33

Tilden’s nomination as Democratic candidate for president in 1876 followed a period of great success for Bourbon Democrats. The party took control of the House of Representatives for the first time since before the war, and the party gained a large base by attracting new immigrants. Samuel Tilden was the face of a new brand of the Democratic Party, and the electoral results bore out the efforts of the Bourbon Democrats. Tilden received the majority of the popular vote in a tight race but lost the Electoral College in the controversial Compromise of 1877. While disappointed at the result, Democrats triumphed at ending Reconstruction with the removal of troops from the South.34 Democrats in the South now had *carte blanche* to institute the Jim Crow laws and voter intimidation tactics to keep the South racially stratified without any federal intervention. The election resulted in the return of the South to solidly Democratic ties,

while causing Northern Democrats to feel the repercussions of perceived backroom swindling when the troops were removed from the South.\textsuperscript{35}

From this point forward, each Southern state made dramatic steps toward African American disenfranchisement: from adopting secret ballots and poll taxes in Florida, Tennessee, Arkansas, Alabama, and Virginia, or holding disenfranchising conventions in Mississippi and South Carolina. Without federal intervention, election laws in these states simply were no longer policed, prompting outrage in the press, but little else.\textsuperscript{36} Within a generation, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of segregation, with \textit{Plessy vs. Ferguson} (1896) providing “separate, but equal” as an unenforceable, lax standard and making Jim Crow universal throughout the South.\textsuperscript{37}

After President James Garfield was murdered by a disappointed office seeker, his successor Chester Arthur pushed for the Pendleton Civil Service Act. The law severely limited patronage and sent shockwaves through both parties, as federal positions were frequently used as currency for party loyalty. Bourbon Democrat Grover Cleveland had built his reputation on defying political bosses and special interest groups as governor of New York and he earned broad support from Democrats in the North and South.\textsuperscript{38} In the 1884 election, with Cleveland as

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\footnotesize{37} Rae, \textit{Southern Democrats}, 31; and Kent, \textit{The Democratic Party}, 263-273.

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the nominee, both parties engaged in dirty tactics. For the first time in two decades, the candidates differed on actual policy: on the protective tariff, with Cleveland a staunch liberal Jacksonian, believing the government should stay out of the way of economics and business. Cleveland’s opponent, James Blaine, fueled rumors of Cleveland fathering an illegitimate baby. Worse, he fell asleep at a rally in New York City as Reverend Samuel Burchard denounced the Democrats as the party of “Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion.” Blaine did nothing to disassociate himself from the comment (and may not have made the connection), but New York Democrats circulated the statement as a slur against Catholics and immigrants. In a tight election (five states were determined by less than 1% of the popular vote, with New York determined by little more than one thousand votes), it was enough and Cleveland became the first Democrat elected since James Buchanan, almost thirty years before.

As president, Cleveland remained as resolutely Jacksonian as promised, using his veto power more than any president before or since, blocking legislation that he felt overstepped the Constitution, whether it emanated from Republicans on Capitol Hill, or Democrats. He was firmly anti-expansionist and kept his promise to eliminate the effects of the protective tariff. He rejected overtures from farmers and miners to use silver to offset monetary problems, believing bimetallism would oversaturate the markets and create a bad precedent for the federal government to intervene with currency inflation. He angered some Democrats by refusing to play the spoils game of appointing only loyal Democrats to positions in the administration, and made appointments more merit-based than any of his predecessors.
Though Cleveland lost a narrow re-election in 1888, he was re-nominated and won the White House again in 1892. However, Cleveland’s party saw its Western support eroded when pro-silver and pro-agrarian forces combined to create the Populist movement. In the beginning, the Farmer’s Alliance attracted farmers as a local special-interest group, mainly in rural areas, but soon evolved into a political movement. By 1891, the party held a convention, issued the Ocala Demands, and named themselves “The People’s Party.” Democrats were in direct opposition with the People’s Party in terms of the size of the federal government, but on many other issues, including a pervading sense of distrust of the banking powers and other federal institutions, the People’s Party began attracting former Democratic constituencies.42

At the 1924 Democratic Convention, Cleveland was one of four presidents represented by banners over the convention floor (along with Jefferson, Jackson, and Wilson). Granted, he was one of only two Democrats elected in over half a century, but his name and legacy was also invoked repeatedly in responses to Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter. In 1924, there were still Democrats who identified with their party primarily on the basis of Cleveland’s *laissez-faire* economic policies, record against corruption, and belief in smaller government.

**The Party of Bryan.**

William Jennings Bryan cast a long shadow over the Democratic Party of the 1920s. He was the epitome of the Democratic Party of Jefferson and Jackson, a man from Nebraska elevated to national renown based on his gifted oratory and melding of party policy with a real connection with dependable voters. Yet, he also became a thorn in the side for progressive

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Democrats seeking to reform the party and move past Bryan’s failures to establish a progressive party with a future. While many of the Circular Letter respondents were indebted to Bryan’s party leadership, he was singled out by many as one of the problems plaguing the party in 1924, especially after his disastrous showing at the Madison Square Garden convention.

Grover Cleveland’s second term was much less successful than his first, with the Panic of 1893 beginning soon after his second inauguration. Cleveland’s laissez-faire policies and belief in his role in the federal government were ineffective when faced with a nationwide crisis. The American public increasingly looked to Washington for solutions, and Cleveland’s reticence to involve the presidency was seen as stubborn, aloof, and uncaring.43 Renewed calls for silver to be used as currency led Democrats in the West to actively court Populists and launch a takeover of the Democratic Party. Soon, the party was divided yet again with Gold Democrats (Cleveland’s camp, the conservative heir to the Jacksonian Democratic mantle) quickly outnumbered by the vocal pro-silver crowd.

When the Democrats met at Chicago in 1896, it became evident that the Democratic Party had changed permanently, as the Bourbon and Gold Democrats joined the reframed Democratic Party. William Jennings Bryan gave a spellbinding speech on the silver issue, complete with dramatic flourishes and religious language. In his “Cross of Gold” speech, Bryan addressed poor farmers, citizens of the West, and all those who were mistrustful of the government and other institutions, branding himself as a champion to their cause, and giving direction for his party to follow. His speech contained diatribes against moneyed interests and specific Protestant rhetoric to bolster his appeal.44 He also separated the Bourbon/Gold

43 Merrill, Bourbon Leader, 171-174; and Milkis and Nelson, American Presidency, 192-194.
Democrats from those he hoped to lead, finishing with his appeal: “You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns; you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”

Bedlam ensued at the convention, with supporters applauding for half an hour and rushing the rostrum, and Bryan was nominated and became the face of the new Democratic Party. Bryan launched a large tour of the Midwest and South, melding the two regions with Democratic and Populist rhetoric. He attracted large crowds eager to see a presidential candidate in person and hear the notorious “Cross of Gold” speech, which Bryan delivered at every stop. Bryan won over Southerners with his racial policies, defending Jim Crow laws and black disenfranchisement, and later, pointedly, did not endorse anti-lynching legislation. William McKinley, another Republican from Ohio, ran a traditional campaign, staying on his front porch in Canton. Bryan won throughout the West and South, but the electoral advantage of the Republicans in the North swung the election in favor of McKinley. This election revealed a tension between party and class identification: increasingly, the Democratic Party welcomed the poor and working class, along with the immigrant and farmer constituency of the past.

Four years later, Bryan was again the Democratic nominee and focused on America’s expansion abroad and increased militarism. He lost again, and McKinley’s re-election elevated Theodore Roosevelt to the vice presidency, a fateful decision made more portentous with

People, 280-281; Hofstadter, American Political Tradition, 184-190; Hofstadter, Age of Reform, 88-89, 105-107; Glad, Trumpet Soundeth, 2-3, 43-50; Kent, The Democratic Party, 338-350; and Rae, Southern Democrats, 11.  
45 Leinwand, William Jennings Bryan, 52-53; and Witcover, Party of the People, 282-284.  
McKinley’s assassination just six months into his new administration. The vast popularity of President Roosevelt caused the Democratic Party to once again endure an identity crisis, as Roosevelt reinvented the presidency and blurred the distinction between Republican, Democrat, and progressive policy positions.

Though ultimately unsuccessful in becoming elected president, William Jennings Bryan succeeded in transforming the Democratic Party. When meeting in 1924, the Democratic Party still contained a significant contingent of delegates who were loyal to Bryan. Woodrow Wilson appointed Bryan as Secretary of State (Bryan’s only position in the federal government after his brief term in the House in the early 1890s), but Bryan became openly critical of the administration as Wilson became increasingly aggressive with the Germans. In truth, Wilson rarely consulted Bryan on foreign matters. As one of the leading figures in the Chautauqua circuit, Bryan increasingly spoke out about Christianity and religious issues. He lent his support to women’s suffrage and became increasingly involved in the prohibition movement. He became openly hostile to Democrats who were not considered extreme “drys,” refusing to support James Cox’s candidacy in 1920 and working to block Al Smith’s campaign in 1924.

By the 1920s, Bryan’s reputation was one of divisiveness: just as he had transformed the Democratic Party by openly challenging the Bourbons with his brand of Populism in the 1890s, he now was viewed as a reactionary, creating constant internal divisions on the subjects of prohibition, religion, and nativism. Heading into the 1924 nominating convention, Bryan was

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still seen as a king-maker with plenty of clout (and there were suspicions that he hoped to once again be the nominee), but also as the subject of derision and ridicule among the progressives in the party. The 1924 Democratic Convention and aftermath would be one of the most humiliating moments of his life.

The Party of Wilson.

Woodrow Wilson was the most divisive figure of the 1924 Democratic Convention, and his two-term presidency cast a long shadow over the party. He died a few months before the convention, though his health had never recovered from his fateful stroke while touring for the League of Nations in September 1919. Democrats gathering in New York City were still trying to sort out the legacy of the most successful Democratic candidate/official in generations, and what he meant for the party.

Wilson’s presidency was only made possible by a giant schism in both the Democratic and Republican Parties in 1912. Wilson first built his reputation as a progressive reformer as professor and then president at Princeton, where he took aim at hierarchical institutions like eating clubs while championing the institution’s growth as a leading research university. He became a darling of the Democratic Party in New Jersey for his critiques of the party’s machinery, and was elected governor in 1910, thrusting him into a leadership role both in his state and his national party.51 The Democrats took control of the House of Representatives for the first time since the early-1890s, seizing an opportunity to infuse progressivism into their party’s platform in stark contrast to the Republican Party’s. When the Democratic Party met in Baltimore for their national convention in 1912, Wilson’s brief tenure as New Jersey governor

was viewed as a success, as he consistently fought against special interests and machinery in his statehouse and promoted reform in elections, business, worker’s rights, and access to utilities, hallmarks of progressivism.\(^{52}\)

While Woodrow Wilson was nominated by the Democrats, Theodore Roosevelt was busy dividing the Republican Party, storming out of the convention to form the Progressive (later called “Bull Moose”) Party in opposition of William Howard Taft’s re-nomination. While conventional wisdom held that Roosevelt divided his own party and delivered the election to the Democrats, Wilson took no chances. He began cultivating a party platform very different from what Bryan and other Democrats offered before and in opposition to Roosevelt’s “New Nationalism.” Wilson spoke of “The New Freedom”: blending conservative Democratic values of smaller government (eliminate the tariff, continue to lessen the power of the party machinery) with progressive reforms (in banking, labor, big business, and government).\(^{53}\) President Taft campaigned very little, while Roosevelt was buoyed by his immense popularity and seemingly unending supply of ideas. Wilson more than held his own on the campaign stump, however, and won significant support for his new ideas. He also savvily maneuvered within Southern circles, remaining noncommittal and vague when pressed on his personal opinions on two of the more pressing progressive pushes: for prohibition and female suffrage. For Southern Democrats, prohibition was a vital regional issue, and Wilson claimed that while he was personally sober, he would enforce whatever laws the states passed. Southern Democrats also feared the influx of new voters that would be introduced with female suffrage. Wilson was more steadfast on this issue, claiming he did not believe women needed the vote.\(^{54}\)


\(^{53}\) Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 143-146.

\(^{54}\) Sarasohn, *Party of Reform*, 148-153; Milkis and Nelson, *American Presidency*, 229-231; Cooper,
When the election results came in, Wilson held a comfortable advantage in the Electoral College, although the popular vote demonstrated the effect of the Roosevelt split. Wilson did not receive the majority of votes in any state, and his overall vote total was significantly less than Bryan received in his three elections. Still, Wilson’s candidacy was the victor in every region of the country, with the Democrats making significant inroads in states they had not claimed since before the Civil War. Notably, the party held the House of Representatives and captured the Senate for the first time since the Civil War.\footnote{Ibid.}

Wilson’s first term was dominated by extending Roosevelt’s progressive measures, including engaging federal patronage, antitrust legislation, workers’ rights, and a commitment to lowering the tariff. On each of these issues, notably, Wilson demonstrated his willingness to lead Congressional Democrats; he was markedly different from his Democratic forebears on this note. Wilson gave credit to congressional leaders, claiming he was merely using his power to help them realize earlier policy goals: “They see that I am attempting to mediate their own thoughts and purposes...They are using me; I am not driving them.”\footnote{Sarasohn, Party of Reform, 166-168.} Particularly on the issue of worker’s rights, Wilson led by example, using the federal government’s employment as proving ground for issues like workman’s compensation, fair minimum wages, child labor, and the eight-hour work day. Notably, however, his Southern roots informed his unwillingness to continue Roosevelt’s policy of careful and deliberate integration of the federal government, with Wilson specifically banning African-Americans from being hired in positions. While these actions might

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Warrior and the Priest, 200-205; Kent, Democratic Party, 405-406; and Witcover, Party of the People, 308-310. For details on the 1912 election, see George E. Mowry’s chapter, “Election of 1912” in Schlesinger, Coming to Power, 264-295.
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have endeared him to Southern Democrats, progressives in the party were disappointed and the
opportunity for advancement was lost for decades.57

Wilson carefully bridged the chasm between the two competing sections of the
Democratic Party, most evidenced when he enacted his most significant reform, the creation of
the Federal Reserve. The issue of banking insecurity was one of the major pillars of the Populist
movement and fed Bryan’s wing of the party. The issue, of course, went back to Jackson’s days
and fears of centralized financial institutions privileging the wealthy and connected at the
expense of the working class. Wilson experienced early success in most of his progressive
initiatives, met with a conciliatory Democratic Congress, but the coming war soon intervened.58

When the Democrats met in St. Louis in June 1916, Wilson’s re-nomination was a
foregone conclusion and the party concentrated on beginning the general election. Wilson’s
Republican opponent, Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes ran a campaign critical of
the progressive platform Wilson put forward (more pronounced labor laws and increased
minimum wage, but basically a reaffirmation of his first administration). The one area where
Wilson was vulnerable was with the looming war: Hughes was critical of Wilson’s lack of
preparation. But Hughes would not criticize the efforts Wilson had made to avoid war, and the
Democrats seized on this as a theme with the slogan “He Kept Us Out of War,” though Wilson
had made no such assurances. Wilson allowed the slogan, especially because he knew the
election would be so close and hinge on tenuous Democratic support in the West, states that the
Democrats had won in 1912 (but only by virtue of the split Taft/Roosevelt Republican
coalition).59 Wilson narrowly won re-election, primarily because he won California, with the

57 Sarasohn, Party of Reform, 170.
58 Milkis and Nelson, American Presidency, 229-243.
59 John Milton Cooper, Breaking the Heart of the World: Woodrow Wilson and the Fight for the League of
Nations (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16-18; Sarasohn, Party of Reform, 192; and Cooper,
peace promise a deciding factor. Wilson became the first Democrat since 1832 to be re-elected to a second term, but the miniscule advantage over Hughes portended an ebb of Democratic support nationwide, and the importance of peace and prosperity to Democratic support.60

Wilson’s role as peace mediator between the belligerents in Europe hinged on American involvement, and the decision to go to war was announced in a Congressional address in January 1917. Wilson couched his foreign policy in universal terms, laying out his “Fourteen Points” to dramatically differentiate his policy from his predecessors. Included in his Fourteen Points was his most ambitious project, the League of Nations. For Democrats, the League was incredibly divisive. Since the inception of the Democratic Party, the foreign policy had been isolationist except in opportunities for expansion. Presidents Jackson and Polk were only interested in conflicts with neighboring nations to keep the balance between pro-slavery and abolitionist states. Cleveland was vehemently isolationist, and Bryan and the Populist-infused Democrats were hostile to McKinley’s overtures in the Caribbean. Wilson’s declaration transformed Democratic foreign policy and represented he clearest indication that Wilson viewed himself as a different Democrat than those who elected him.61

Of course, to separate himself so thoroughly from traditional Democratic Party foreign policy meant that Wilson had little immediate support, and a host of vested opposition. Henry Cabot Lodge, Republican Senator from Massachusetts, voiced immediate concern with the League of Nations, and in particular “Article X,” which committed member nations to each other’s aid when threatened. The United States military relied on the reinstatement of a

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61 Cooper, Breaking the Heart of the World, 19-22; Hofstadter, American Political Tradition, 256-269; Milkis and Nelson, American Presidency, 243-246; and Witcover, Party of the People, 324-326.
conscription draft in 1917 to grow the ranks of the Army to be deployed in Europe, and the idea that the United States would be obligated to fight in future wars without Congressional approval was labeled unconstitutional at best. As the 1918 midterm elections approached, Wilson suggested that the American people use their Congressional vote as a mandate of support for his League proposal. Wilson’s mandate was highly controversial for making foreign policy a political issue and put Republicans in Congress in an understandably adversarial role. The Democrats were soundly defeated, but Wilson remained undeterred.62

In January 1919, Wilson led a historic delegation to cross the Atlantic and negotiate the Treaty of Versailles in person, the first time a president had left American soil for Europe during his presidency. At Versailles, Wilson worked to convince Georges Clemenceau and David Lloyd George of the efficacy of his League of Nations plan. Reluctantly, and after much convincing, Wilson was able to convince both leaders and returned to the United States pledged to deliver American popular support. Lodge continued to rail against the League of Nations, and was outraged at Wilson’s efforts to court diplomatic favor to the League after the rejection in the midterms of 1918 and angered that no Republicans were included in the Versailles delegation.63 Woodrow Wilson launched a nationwide tour in September 1919 to appeal directly to the American people on the efficacy of the League of Nations.64

In a fateful speech at Pueblo, Colorado, Wilson used the imagery of the fallen soldiers from his trip to Versailles and was moved to tears, as were some in the audience. After the speech, Wilson suffered a severe collapse and was rushed back to Washington, D.C. Upon

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returning, his wife found him collapsed on the ground after suffering a debilitating stroke. Wilson’s wife orchestrated a massive effort to mask Wilson’s incapacitation, barring Vice President Thomas Marshall, Wilson’s Cabinet, and Congressional officials from private audiences with the president, and she allowed one carefully-staged photograph to be disseminated in the press. But, no matter the machinations of his wife, Wilson’s incapacitation put an end to his League of Nations campaign and the support for his proposal ended, too. Wilson left office in early 1921 as a defeated and bitter old man. His party was still sorting out his legacy three years later when they met at Madison Square Garden.

1920: Democratic Tensions Explode.

When the Democrats convened in San Francisco in 1920, there was no clear direction and looming shadow of the incumbent president hanging over the proceedings. It was widely acknowledged that Wilson could not be re-nominated, but the president refused to concede that his presidency was over or give any indication as to who his successor should be. Adding to the conflict was his pet project, the League of Nations, and the loyalty that he expected from his party members as his administration waned. There was no consensus candidate, and no one with a distinguished record or star on the rise. Wilson put an end to the candidacy of his Secretary of Treasury (and son-in-law) William Gibbs McAdoo, in hopes that a fractured convention would lead the delegates to draft the president for an unprecedented third term. Similarly, his Attorney General Mitchell Palmer would not have his blessing, and the president’s League gamble hampered his chances of being able to run against the administration’s record in any credible way. Instead, the party turned to governors, among them Al Smith (New York), Edward Edwards

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65 Cooper, Breaking the Heart of the World, 192-207; and Witcover, Party of the People, 329-330.
(New Jersey), and James Cox (Ohio), while some, like Franklin Roosevelt sought to recruit Herbert Hoover to take the nomination.\textsuperscript{66}

In a return to the fractious nominating procedure in 1912, the delegates took forty-four ballots to choose their candidate, and James Cox emerged as the nominee.\textsuperscript{67} In the thirteen elections since the Civil War, the Republicans nominated an Ohioan ten times (the only exceptions were James Blaine in 1884, Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, and Charles Evans Hughes in 1916), and, one month later, nominated Ohio Senator Warren Harding as their nominee. The Democrats relied almost exclusively on New York candidates, normally balancing the ticket with an Indianan or Ohioan, but this was the first time that an Ohioan would lead the ticket; it was also the second time that both candidates hailed from the same state (in 1904, both Alton Parker and Theodore Roosevelt were New Yorkers).

Harding was prepared to run a reactionary campaign, with Republicans harshly critical of the progressive indulgences that highlighted the Wilson administration. In the last year alone, the amendments for women’s suffrage and prohibition were finalized, adding to the turbulence felt from World War I, Wilson’s expansion of the federal government, labor unrest, and financial insecurity. Harding was not a brilliant man, and his campaign managers preferred to keep him on a short leash, limiting his exposure to daily speeches from his front porch in Marion (a supposed nod to the fallen Ohio president William McKinley from two decades before, but for less virtuous reasons). Harding’s folksy demeanor and promise for a “return to normalcy” proved a surprising tonic, and Cox recognized his campaign had a lot of work to do to convince the American people to continue with the Democratic Party.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{67} Kent, \textit{The Democratic Party}, 441-443.
\textsuperscript{68} John A. Morello, \textit{Selling the President, 1920: Albert Lasker, Advertising, and the Election of Warren G.}
Cox’s candidacy was buoyed by the energetic support of his young running mate, Franklin Roosevelt and they did the exact opposite of the static Harding, launching the first nationwide tour to appeal directly to voters. His first stop after receiving word of his nomination was to accompany his running mate to the White House to get the blessing of the frail president. Wilson seized the opportunity to secure Cox’s pledge to continue his work towards American participation in the League of Nations. Wilson had very little knowledge or interest in the popularity of the League, and cared very little whether or not that pledge would ruin Cox’s chances to be elected.\(^{69}\) Cox’s ambitious campaign tour hampered his energy by dedicating most of his energy to tailoring each speech to specific audiences. This was no mean feat, as the fractured Democratic Party had many different causes for Cox to speak intelligently about: Chinese immigration and preparedness in San Francisco; land reclamation in Seattle; and prohibition enforcement in Portland.\(^{70}\)

Cox’s strenuous schedule afforded him few breaks, and with new auditory technology only being introduced sporadically, Cox was unable to present a consistently composed candidacy. Cox’s campaign was doggedly positive, and he focused on the issues, avoiding addressing his opponent or his opponent’s record, likely a mistake as Harding kept mum on issues that he likely knew little about.\(^{71}\) As the tour continued, Cox was dogged with questions about the League of Nations, and he slowly began questioning his own dedication to the

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enterprise. Regardless of his efforts, the American people were prepared to return to the Republicans and the normalcy of Harding’s promise, and he was overwhelmingly elected. The Democrats returned to disarray, unclear of how to proceed as the party out of power in all three branches of the federal government.

The Harding Cabinet was dominated by more auspicious and brilliant minds than the president, with Charles Evans Hughes heading State and Andrew Mellon leading the Treasury Department. Mellon led the Harding Administration toward associationalism, removing all governmental impediments to the economy, and assuredly, the economy was still robust from the World War I production boom. While the administration presided over prosperous times, scandals involving other members of Harding’s Cabinet began to crop up. The most infamous of the Harding scandals was the Teapot Dome land deal, when Interior Secretary Albert Fall took bribes in exchange for access to oil reserves beneath the Teapot Dome preserve in Wyoming, a stunning reversal of the progressive conservation of Harding’s Republican forebear, Theodore Roosevelt. Just as the scandal was emerging, and Harding’s knowledge of the activities queried, the president launched a nationwide rail tour that included Alaska. On his way down the Pacific Coast, Harding became ill and died suddenly and mysteriously in San Francisco. He was replaced by his taciturn vice president, Calvin Coolidge, who moved very quickly to prosecute those involved in the Teapot Dome scandal and distance himself from Harding’s indulgences, but the damage to the Republican brand was done. As the Democrats convened in Madison

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74 Rutland, *The Democrats*, 182.
Square Garden in 1924, the situation was ripe for the party to reclaim the White House; their greatest obstacle would prove to be themselves.

**Democratic Divisions**

The Democratic Party of 1924 was not only divided by a fractured legacy. Consistent schisms provided distance between factions of the Democratic Party and were evident in the responses to the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter. The most obvious divisions were: the regional divide between the Northeast and the South and West; the competing ideological factions of conservatives, liberals, moderates, and progressives, all jousting for prominence in the party; and the major issues that transcended ideological identity, namely the protective tariff, the League of Nations, Prohibition, and the Ku Klux Klan.

**Across the Mason-Dixon Line: Regional Divisions.**

The most visible division in the Democratic Party, and the one that dominated conventions and voting, was the regional divide. The Democrats separated into three distinct regions: the North or Northeast (New York, New Jersey, and New England, along with major cities in the North); the South, which consisted of the former Confederate and border states; and the West, from the Plains to the Pacific.\(^{75}\) The geographical divide, of course, transcended ideological concerns and the major issues of the day. It was also the easiest to quantify: states voted as a unit at convention and in the general election, and were able to be grouped along voting patterns. Tensions between the different regions, however, were much more difficult to unknot and attempt to mend.

The schism began early in the Jeffersonian Democratic period, as farmers and those tied to agriculture in rural areas in the South felt distinct from the merchants and businessmen of the

\(^{75}\) Rae, *Southern Democrats*, 10.
cities in the North. The “peculiar institution” of slavery made the South a place like no other, where daily life revolved around the institution in a way Northerners could never relate to. Religion, education, and even the government reinforced these divisions, and the idea of social hierarchy and natural aristocracy were protected against all reason. Jefferson himself nurtured this division, and Andrew Jackson helped make the divide permanent when he came to power. Jackson’s distrust of banks and powerful, centralized government resonated with farmers, especially as the issue of slavery began to be discussed. In Monroe’s Era of Good Feelings, it was easy to consider laws as all emanating from the same place; everyone was a part of the same party and prosperity and protection were mutual interests. As Jackson’s rise gave birth to a new, more focused Democratic Party, it became clear that the South had a political persuasion to belong to and reinforce.

The Civil War and Reconstruction made the divide between Northern and Southern Democrats permanent. In the aftermath, the Democratic Party was quickly reborn in the South, and sought to maintain power and order through intimidation tactics and oppressive laws, replacing the institution of slavery with voting restrictions and disenfranchisement conventions, Jim Crow laws, and terrorist groups like the White League, Knights of Camellia, and Ku Klux Klan, and calling themselves “Redeemers.” The Supreme Court with Plessy v. Ferguson upheld the constitutionality of Jim Crow laws and allowed racial segregation to pervade unabated in the South in 1896, but the policies were already in place decades before.

76 Black and Black, Vital South, 33-35; and Taylor, Where Did the Party Go?, 30-31.
77 Hofstadter, American Political Tradition, 77-91; Black and Black, Vital South, 36-37; and Rae, Southern Democrats, 29.
78 It is important to note that voting restrictions and the growth of terrorist groups like the Klan was not exclusive to the South, but the organizations flourished throughout the South while they were often met with great resistance in Northern areas throughout this first wave of the Klan.
79 Kousser, Shaping of Southern Politics, 6-8; Key, Southern Politics, 534-550; Feldman, Irony of the Solid South, 1-8; Summers, Ordeal of the Reunion, 164-170; Summers, Rum, Romanism, & Rebellion, 30-37; Rae, Southern Democrats, 31; Woodward, Origins of the New South, 54-59; Grantham, Life & Death of the Solid South,
At the heart of the increasing divide between Northern and Southern Democrats was a cultural difference: Democrats who lived in cities in the North had different concerns than those living in rural areas in the South. Southern Democrats balked at the immorality of the city machinery’s operations, but turned the other way as White Leagues purged voting rolls and barred African Americans from their polling places. The South contained divided minds and values, as many different impulses and demands were depended on the individual state, the prevailing crop and economy (and reliance upon sharecropping or tenant farming), or distance from governing city. Southern Democrats also felt increasingly out of step with the changing politics in the North, and the threats of populism, single-issue third parties, and political independence were both intoxicating and threatening to the region. Still, while it was said there were “many Souths,” they still voted much the same way, even if the pressure and sentiment was varied.

Issues like prohibition held double value for Southerners, coupling their political views with religious fervor, as the Protestant and Baptist communities in the South reviled the growing Catholic and Jewish influence in the cities. Populism was able to make inroads in sections of the South by preying on Southerners’ fears and distrust of “the City,” big business, capitalism, intellectuals, and, simply, elites. “No stump speech in the South was complete,” J. Morgan Kousser wrote, “without blasts at the railroads, the trusts, Wall Street, the gold bugs, the saloonkeepers, or some similarly evil ‘Interest.’”

6-14, 26-53; and McGerr, *Decline of Popular Politics*, 6-7. For in-depth details of the policies of the individual states to protect the one-party system throughout the South, see Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 19-314. For details on the literacy tests, poll taxes, and all-white primaries, see Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 555-663.

Earle Black and Merle Black wrote that the dependence Southern Democrats had on Northern Democrats was out of necessity, faced with unrealistic options: “Republican presidential candidates were not a genuine option for most southern white voters. The Democratic Party was the only institution in which they could have any influence on national policy.” C. Vann Woodward wrote that this dependence ultimately led to the region’s impotence: “Neither of the parties was obliged to consult seriously the needs and wishes of the South: one found it unnecessary, the other useless.” The only virtue was in providing a base of support for the Democratic Party, which in turn, virtually ignored the region.83

Populism’s success in the Democratic Party was owed to a merging of Southern and Western interests. Democrats in Western states shared Southern Democrats’ distrust of the federal government and the extension of federal powers into issues like trade, education, and banking.84 William Jennings Bryan savvily blended his speeches about the gold standard with religious rhetoric and pro-Jim Crow segregation rhetoric, playing on the Southern constituency, while fears of an African-American voting majority if Republicans prevailed in the region forced Democrats to several concessions with Populists. Bryan consistently polled well in Western states, adding to the reliable Southern coalition.85

Woodrow Wilson’s 1912 victory was an aberration, as he benefitted from the split Republican Party, and the 1916 re-election saw him dominate the South and West, becoming the first Democrat to win a state on the Pacific Coast.86 But 1920 was a return to previous form for the Democrats, and James Cox prevailed only in the Solid South (minus Tennessee and Missouri). The reliance of the Democratic Party on the Solid South led to an inequality among

the three regions.

Democratic delegates gravitated towards candidates from the Northern states, especially as the electorate skewed more and more non-partisan or independent. Successful Congressmen or governors from states like Ohio or New York were naturally more attractive, as they were able to represent the better efforts of the Democratic Party without the unnecessary baggage that many still associated with Southern Democrats. Thus, candidates like James Cox and Al Smith felt a natural entitlement to being the party’s standard-bearer, while Southerners like Oscar Underwood or Joseph Robinson, both effective Senators, were more valuable in their positions in Congress. Woodrow Wilson was the exception, as he married his Southern ties with sufficiently Northern qualities: being president of Princeton University and governor of New Jersey. 

There were institutional elements still in place to secure the power of the South in the conventions, and the 1924 convention was no exception. Ever since the 1830s, the Democratic Party had the “two-thirds rule” in place at the nominating conventions, requiring two-thirds of the delegates to vote for the winning candidate. Optimistically, the victor would be buoyed by a nomination consisting of such a large majority, demonstrating a unified front. In reality, the two-thirds rule effectively allowed the Southern faction of the Democratic Party to hold the rest of the convention captive with veto power. Further, the “unit rule” enacted in several states (and all of the states in the South) to force delegates from each state to vote for the same candidate (and prevent the vote splintering that was essential for compromises).

The convention rules also meant that the Southern Democrats were at a permanent disadvantage. The unit rule was their only hope: Democrats in states throughout the South had candidates drawn up far ahead of the convention but then had to stand behind the standard bearer

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88 Black and Black, *Vital South*, 81-86; and Rae, *Southern Democrats*, 11.
when compromise candidates were elevated. The two-thirds and unit rules made it increasingly
difficult for attractive secondary candidates to emerge from the South. The two-thirds rule meant
that any Southern Democrat placed into nomination could be overruled by the other regions.
Their veto power, able to overrule the more extreme machinations of the Northern Democrats,
resulted in the Southern Democrats often compromising for a candidate they could abide.89
Southern Democrats responding to Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter felt that they were being
left out of the party’s political process, especially on the convention level. The South was never
in danger of falling to Republicans, to the point that the nickname “the Solid South”
demonstrated both the faith the party leaders had in the region and the scant attention they paid
to their needs and desires. This was unsatisfactory to Southern party leaders and faithful who felt
that their votes were being taken for granted.90

This issue of a Southern voting bloc became one of vital importance in recent
conventions. From 1876-1908, the Democratic Party balloting process at convention was
remarkably efficient. Grover Cleveland (1888 and 1892) and William Jennings Bryan (1900 and
1908) were re-nominated by acclamation. Samuel Tilden (1876), Winfield Scott Hancock
(1880), Cleveland (1884), and Alton Parker (1904), took one or two ballots to be nominated.
Only William Jennings Bryan in 1896 took more than two ballots, requiring just five.

Woodrow Wilson’s nomination in 1912 required 45 ballots and James Cox’s nomination
in 1920 required 44 ballots, with the South comprising 22% of the total vote for the winning
candidate. This was considerably less than the 40-41% of the total commanded by Bryan and
Parker in 1896 and 1904, when the South was hugely instrumental in selecting the nominee. In
1924, Davis’ nomination took an incredible 103 ballots, with the South responsible for 39% of

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89 Black and Black, *Vital South*, 84-86.
90 Rae, *Southern Democrats*, 33-38.
Davis’ total support. Yet, he was a compromise candidate, and the South had become
disenchanted with the art of compromise.  

Southern Democrats suffered at the conventions with the two-thirds rule, where they
were a powerful voting bloc, but not a majority. Too often, Democrats from the northern states
were able to overrule the South (especially when teamed with Democrats from the West), while
the South remained reliable for the general election. In some elections, the only support for
Democratic candidates came from the South, and from 1876-1924, there were only rare
Republican candidates who were able to make any kind of inroads in the region, as when
Missouri defected for Theodore Roosevelt in 1904 (and even then, it was only temporary).

The “peculiar institution” label from the days of slavery in some ways allowed for
Northerners to condescend to Southerners while prospering financially from the end result (and,
in many cases, engaging in the same kinds of behavior towards African Americans): to people
who never relied on slavery as a way of life, it was easy to write it off as an obvious wrong. For
Southerners, obviously, the reality was much more complicated. The same was true in the
Democratic Party of the 1920s: Northern Democrats (and increasingly, those in the West, as
well) prospered from the loyalty of Southern Democrats, but were unwilling to examine the
particular ideas Southern Democrats had about their party in their region. Instead, they operated
as two distinct parties who shared a name and a convention floor every four years.  

Who Were the Democrats?: Ideology.

The issue of party ideology was intertwined with regional schisms and divisions over the
major issues of the 1920s. But ideology was an important defining characteristic to the Circular
Letter respondents, who identified strongly with being categorized as conservative, liberal,

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91 Rae, Southern Democrats, 37.
92 Black and Black, Vital South, 40-51.
progressive, or some combination. Like the previous discussion of party leadership, so much of the definition of ideology depended on the individual doing the defining: conservatism in the Democratic Party meant different things to different delegates and voters, just as progressivism was an incredibly loaded term. Overlap between the different strains was unavoidable. Regional construction of the party’s ideology was also important, making the enterprise of selecting a candidate to best represent the party a particularly confusing and polarizing challenge.

Defining the conservative/liberal split in the Democratic Party in this era is a challenge, as the party did not necessarily think in these terms, but definitely acted in them. Douglas Craig’s After Wilson chronicled the development of the conservative wing of the Democratic Party in the period between Wilson and Roosevelt’s presidencies and provided succinct definition, credited to Clinton Rossiter: political conservatism was “a sense of satisfaction and identity with the status quo;” conservatives “think of liberty as something to be preserved and defended, whereas liberals view it as being capable of improvement and enlargement.” Conservatives viewed the growth and abuse of governmental power as the chief opponent to human liberty.93

The prevailing wing of the Democratic Party in 1924 was still the conservatives, but the definition was evolving. Through the latter nineteenth century, conservative Democrats (sometimes referred to and self-identified as “Bourbons”) were the only electable brand. Bourbons were savvy to begin reforming the Democratic Party to become politically viable in the aftermath of Reconstruction, seeking to reestablish the Jacksonian mantle from before the Civil War. Bourbons were concerned with the role of the federal government, and opposed expanding the executive’s powers or Washington’s reach. Samuel Tilden and Grover Cleveland were the best examples of the Bourbons: Northern (both from New Jersey), reform-minded, pro-

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93 Craig, After Wilson, 10-11.
business (and anti-regulation), and focused on financial issues. They were also, notably, suspicious of agrarian and labor activists.\(^94\) Even as the party attracted voters from disparate backgrounds, and became a safe haven for those opposed to unfair business practices, conservatives actively sought to minimize the activities of reformers and prevent them from taking positions of leadership in the party, particularly at conventions.\(^95\) This helped, for a time, keep the status quo within the Democratic Party, but also led to lingering unrest and discontent that would blow up in 1924.

The Redeemers in the South were also conservative, and many might have considered themselves Bourbons if not for the name’s association with alcohol (a prevailing issue in the South). They were differentiated from the Northern Bourbons in that they remained focused on racial issues throughout the South. When elected, however, Northern Bourbons also devoted legislation to restricting voting for African Americans. Redeemers were overwhelmingly popular in their states, dominating state-wide elective office through voter intimidation and eliminating the opposition.\(^96\) In this way, Redeemers recognized that elections were the only way to maintain the order they desperately craved, and they fought to pass increasingly restrictive measures to limit voting participation to only Democrats. An outgrowth of this passivity was the pandemic of lynchings which terrorized African Americans and those sympathetic to them, leading Republicans to push for anti-lynching legislation and earn the ire of Bourbons and Redeemers.\(^97\) The South remained paralyzed for decades as the Redeemers of the Democratic Party resisted

\(^95\) Merrill, *Bourbon Leader*, 45.
change from outside (thwarting Populism) and within (keeping African Americans and those sympathetic from voting or holding office).  

Jeff Taylor traced the strain of liberalism through the Democratic Party in *Where Did the Party Go?*, charting the progression from the natural rights theories of John Locke and Adam Smith’s economic theories (nurtured by Thomas Jefferson himself, who called himself a “classical liberal” in 1824) through what was termed “classical liberalism” in the early twentieth century, combining elements of progressivism (from muckrakers to reformers) and populism. The fusion of the Democratic Party with Populism was a clear example of liberalism emerging in the party at the end of the nineteenth century. The group was born out of deep-seated fears of the growth of federal banks and the efforts the government made to protect capitalist ventures in America. Populists formally organized the People’s Party in 1891, and were suspicious of both Democrats and Republicans equally. Populists were mainly farmers and poor workers, typically from the Midwest and West, but also made significant gains in the South by collaborating with Republicans in states like Alabama and North Carolina. William Jennings Bryan signaled the willingness of the Democratic Party to embrace many of the Populists’ demands, and his speech at the 1896 Democratic convention was seamlessly blended Populism with the Democratic platform. A popular cartoon in Republican magazine *Judge* showed Bryan as a snake with “Populist Party” etched on his body, slowly swallowing a donkey labeled “Democratic Party.” The liberal wing of the party now had the most visible figure, his repudiation over the course of three lost presidential bids doing nothing to dim his star among his followers and his personality.

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100 Merrill, *Bourbon Leader*, 205-206.
having overshadowed the movement’s platform in large measure; like the snake in the cartoon, it was hard to tell where support for the party ended and Bryan began.

There was significant overlap between the liberal wing and the insurgent Progressive movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Woodrow Wilson’s candidacy and presidency depended on the merger of the two factions (and earned the ire of conservative Democrats). Progressives challenged both parties from within, looking for reform in diverse areas like suffrage, prohibition, voting reform, child and female labor laws, access to education, health care, and family planning, and even the obscure, like the anti-fluoride push in Portland, Oregon. Progressive voters often courted (and threatened) both parties and focused largely on single issues, making their association with a single party difficult, but their presence in both was known. While Wilson’s presidency was sidelined by World War I and the League of Nations, Wilson had left an indelible mark on the Democratic Party. Like Bryan before him, Wilson transformed the Democratic Party into an unrecognizable form, and it was left to those in his wake to figure out the best course forward.

By 1920, there were three competing factions: the conservatives/ Bourbons/ Redeemers/ Gold Democrats who represented the Democratic Party of Cleveland; the liberal/ Populist Democrats who were led by Bryan; and the new Progressive wing led by Wilson. There were those who were not affiliated with any wing (James Cox tried to position himself as a moderate:

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103 Bryan considered himself an ideological heir of Jefferson, and never tired of making comparisons between himself and Jefferson, citing their focus on the “principles of democracy, majority rule, rights of man, self-government, and America’s mission and destiny.” It was said that Bryan quoted Jefferson more than any other source, save for the Scriptures, though Levine echoed William Allen White’s statement that Bryan had only a shallow understanding of Jefferson and his writings; Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, 222-227.
willing to compromise with conservatives on progressive issues, like Prohibition enforcement but wary of the activist label\textsuperscript{104}, and obviously, those candidates and state officials who bridged the gap between liberal and Progressive, or liberal and conservative, but the major candidates all espoused views aligned with one of these three factions.

\textbf{The Major Divisive Issues of 1924.}

In any election cycle, there are debates over party policy among the leaders and delegates, and the Democratic Party was used to having intense battles over platform planks. In 1924, however, the debate became irreconcilable, and the convention reinforced the deep schisms plaguing the Democratic Party, instead of healing them. One of the problems was allowing the animosity to fester between election, and hoping the national convention would provide a catharsis and unity among delegates. Rather, the 1924 Democratic National Convention was marred by intense floor fights, the battle over presidential nominee seguing into an acrimonious battle over the platform. The Republican Party, meanwhile, had the good sense to take care of party disagreements behind closed doors, both arriving at conventions with designated nominee firmly in place and having the platforms and rhetoric fine-tuned beforehand, requiring only vocal assent. The disaster at Madison Square Gardens revealed a divided party in desperate need of direction, something Franklin Roosevelt sought to provide in the aftermath. In this section, I will discuss four of the leading issues that delegates referred to in their letters as needing resolution: the protective tariff, the League of Nations, Prohibition enforcement, and the Ku Klux Klan.

\textsuperscript{104} Rutland, \textit{The Democrats}, 180-181.
The Protective Tariff.

As opposed to the other three issues in this section, most Democrats were unified in their opposition to a protective tariff. This issue is included not because it created a divide within the party, but rather because so many Democrats referred to the protective tariff as a point of emphasis in their responses to Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter as a guiding principle moving forward.

For nearly a century, opposition to protective tariffs had been a unifying hallmark of the Democratic Party as a personal belief and principle of the Democratic Presidents, but not official Democratic economic policy. Both Jefferson and Jackson were suspicious of any method that allowed the federal government to inflate costs arbitrarily, though both men accepted that the tariff may be necessary to lower American debt especially in the aftermath of the War of 1812.\(^{105}\) As a former general, Jackson was also sensitive to the issue of raising quick money for the military, and believed that the protective tariff could be useful to raise the appropriate funds for defense, but nothing else. Still, Jackson used his concern over the tariff as one of the cornerstones of his presidential bids, and Southerners especially demanded action when he was ultimately elected, resulting in a confrontation with John C. Calhoun.\(^{106}\)

Grover Cleveland, like other Bourbons, built his career on eliminating the federal government’s largesse, and the protective tariff was one of his chief targets. His three candidacies for the presidency were predicated on his opposition to the protective tariffs, the most recent being hastily composed before Democrats seized control of Congress in 1883 and which Cleveland claimed violated “natural order.”\(^{107}\) The issue became strictly partisan, with

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\(^{105}\) Taylor, *Where Did the Party Go?*, 11.
\(^{107}\) Tom Terrill, *The Tariff, Politics, and American Foreign Policy, 1874-1901* (Westport, CT: Greenwood
Republicans recruiting Northern Democrats to oppose the issue and block any legislation started by Cleveland-sympathetic Southern Democrats. Progressive Democrats campaigned to remove the tariff for good, replacing the need for a protective tax with a standard income tax.\textsuperscript{108}

Just after his inauguration, Woodrow Wilson convened a special joint session of Congress to make tariff reformation a priority. Wilson championed a measure proposed by Senator Oscar Underwood (notably, a Southern Democrat from Alabama), and transcended his branch’s reach by contacting senators directly to negotiate for the Underwood Tariff’s passage. The Underwood Tariff would lower the rate to 25\% and pointed to the recently-approved Sixteenth Amendment, guaranteeing a federal income tax, as assurance that the tariff would no longer be needed.\textsuperscript{109}

For most Democrats, Wilson’s efforts regarding the tariff had put the issue to rest, perhaps for good. In doing so, he had fulfilled a campaign pledge, but also continued the work of his Democratic forebears. When he left office, Republicans in Congress passed successive measures to revisit the issue. The first, in 1921, was ostensibly to help farmers whose income had fluctuated after the instability of World War I and the aftermath. The second, passed in 1922, was a return to the Republican tariffs of before, raising rates on most goods being imported, in the name of protectionism. This time, however, the action was met with European competitors who placed tariffs on most of their goods, too, effectively narrowing the market for American foodstuffs and manufactured goods. While the economy slowly rebounded, Democrats and


progressives pointed to the tariff as unnecessarily protecting American businesses and farmers from themselves.\textsuperscript{110}

By 1924, the issue of the protective tariff was one on which most Democrats could agree. To them, Wilson’s leadership on the issue had provided stability and attempted to eliminate this issue from dominating political cycles. World War I had caused huge reverberations on the American economy, and the Underwood Tariff’s true value was unable to be measured when Republicans upended it to reinstate their previous policies. Later in the decade, the issue of the tariff would begin to recede, but in 1924, the protective tariff was a galvanizing issue for Democrats.

\textit{The League of Nations.}

The League of Nations was an enormously costly issue for the Democrats in 1920. For James Cox, the issue was an albatross: he needed President Woodrow Wilson’s support for his bid and all of the Democratic Party support he could muster, and so he mistakenly promised the president to continue his effort promoting the League. The election’s result, rejecting Cox, served as a referendum on the League, but the issue still rankled some Democrats and garnered an appreciable amount of responses to Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter.

There were few more divisive issues for the Democratic Party in the early twentieth century than the League of Nations. The conservative Democrats who considered Jefferson, Jackson, and Cleveland as forebears were traditionally isolationist. Woodrow Wilson was a different type of Democrat and worried very little what his predecessors had believed. By all accounts, Wilson was an incredibly self-aware man, and he indulged a belief in his own predetermination: where others would view his meteoric rise from university professor to

\textsuperscript{110} Taussig, \textit{Tariff History of the United States}, 447-454, 483-488.
governor to president as a confluence of advantageous breaks, Wilson believed he was elected president to preside over precisely the crisis that broke out in Europe.111

Privately, Woodrow Wilson wrestled with the best policy for dealing with the conflict in Europe. When the war first began in 1914, Wilson urged the American people to be “neutral in thought as well as action.” The economy was stimulated by the boost to manufacturing as the warring nations needed goods produced rapidly, and the war in Europe was complicated to a nation filled with new and recent immigrants, with one-third of the population either being foreign born or the child of a foreign-born parent. The potential loss of life for America’s young men was also cause for concern, especially for a conflict which, on the surface, did not suggest an immediate danger for the United States.112

Wilson’s ambivalence about America’s position wavered, pointedly disregarding his secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan’s advice. Bryan advocated for “non-intervention,” which would have allowed the United States to maintain diplomatic relationships with warring nations, but Wilson saw a distinct financial advantage to maintaining prosperous ties with Britain. Shortly after his second inauguration, Germany torpedoed several more American merchant ships and Wilson allowed the Zimmerman note to be released, demonstrating German conspiratorial overtures with the Mexican government. With Congressional support likely, Wilson made the most of war declaration.113

Wilson set the tone for his League fight in his first address on the war, a joint session of Congress in January 1917. Wilson called for a “covenant of cooperative peace,” and asked the

warring nations to consider “peace without victory.” In this way, American involvement would not be about any potential gains, and Wilson wanted to eliminate that line of thinking from both the Central and Allied nations.\(^{114}\) Wilson articulated the “Fourteen Points,” fourteen reasons for American involvement in the conflict. Most were about territorial claims and some rules for diplomatic engagement between nations, but the speech culminated with the fourteenth point, on the League, calling for a coalition “affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity,” rendering future wars avoidable and unnecessary.\(^{115}\)

While the idea was well-received in Europe, especially among the Allied Powers eager for American intervention (whatever their reasoning) and an end to the conflict, Wilson knew he faced a battle at home with Senate Republicans. At the root of Lodge’s opposition was Article X of the League of Nations “guarantees” which stated: “The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League. In case of any such aggression, threat, or danger, the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation should be fulfilled.” To Lodge and others, including some Democrats, this comprised an entangling alliance, inducing America’s future involvement even in conflicts that had absolutely nothing to do with them. Senate Democrats were in an awkward position, with the stark opposition from Lodge and Republicans, and Wilson unwilling to amend or compromise on any part of the League of Nations compact.\(^{116}\)

\(^{114}\) Cooper, *Breaking the Heart of the World*, 10-13, 21-23; and Cooper, *Warrior and the Priest*, 312-315.
After Wilson’s stroke and paralysis, support for the League faded. Without Wilson to direct, or meddle in, the League fight, the Senate fell into three distinct camps: those who were loyal to Wilson’s vision; those, like Lodge, who supported the idea of the League but not Article X, called “reservationists”; and “Irreconcilables,” who were opposed to the League in total. Lodge attempted several compromise bills, supporting the League of Nations but with amendments about America’s inducement to participate in foreign conflicts. Wilson’s acolytes were directed to reject any and all amended League bills, and the bill failed to receive a two-thirds vote.\footnote{Zieger, America’s Great War, 222-224. For a discussion of Senate vote, see: Cooper, Breaking the Heart of the World, 370-375. For James M. Cox’s critical view of Lodge’s lobbying, see his chapter “The Great Conspiring,” in Journey Through My Years, 245-264.}

As the 1920 election approached, Wilson made clear that he expected the election to be a referendum on the League of Nations. Privately, Wilson hoped that the deadlocked Democratic Convention would result in his being drafted for an unprecedented third term, which did not happen. When James Cox was nominated, his first action after his acceptance rally in Dayton, was to pay President Wilson a visit at the White House with his running mate, Franklin Roosevelt. There, the two men found the president frail, but he did manage turn the symbolic meeting into a promise from Cox to continue his League fight: While Cox would tell the press that the president and he agreed “on the meaning and sufficiency of the Democratic platform and the duty of the party,” Wilson claimed Cox and he “are absolutely one with regard to the great issue of the League of Nations.”\footnote{Cox, Journey Through My Years, 241-245, 265-283; Rutland, The Democrats, 180-182; Cooper, Breaking the Heart of the World, 387-388; and Faykosh, “The Front Porch of the American People,” 65. For more on Cox’s addressing the League of Nations on the campaign tour, see “Away from the Front Porch,” 55-90, in Faykosh, “Front Porch of the American People.”}

Cox was handily defeated in November 1920, with many viewing the defeat, as Wilson wanted, as a referendum on the League of Nations. Almost all of the other principal nations.
joined the League, while the notably abstentions were Germany, Soviet Union, and, without the passage in the Senate, the United States. Woodrow Wilson passed away in February 1924, and his legacy was well-debated among Democrats, with a tribute planned at the Democratic Convention in New York City in June. William Gibbs McAdoo, the front-runner for the nomination (and Wilson’s son-in-law) counted among his supporters those who still wanted passage for the League of Nations and believed that Republicans in the Senate were the sole reason the League was never passed. Wilson’s reputation in some quarters of the Democratic Party was never dimmed, and his legacy as a peacemaker (burnished by his recognition from the Nobel Peace Prize committee with the 1919 award) and reformer was something that other Democrats should aspire to be.

Prohibition.

Like the League of Nations, Prohibition was another divisive issue for the Democratic Party that, by all rights, should have been considered settled. The history of the prohibition movement within the Democratic Party was fraught with tension, and truly transcended any party, regional, or ideological considerations. As the 1924 election approached, the issue was not so much about the legality of the prohibition amendment (though there were some responses to the Circular Letter that did address the fight), but focused more on the more pressing concern: enforcement. For some of the Democratic front-runners, the issue of enforcing a law they did not agree with became politically dangerous, and the party being labeled “wet” and being seen as permissive rankled more than a few respondents.

Opposition to alcohol consumption had been evident in America from its inception but pressure on politicians to pass prohibition began to take root with the formation of the politically organized Anti-Saloon League and Women’s Christian Temperance Union. The Anti-Saloon
League flourished in its association with churches, counting among its influence 60,000 churches between 1911 and 1925, mostly in rural areas and always in opposition to Catholics. One of the great successes of the Anti-Saloon League was in persuading labor leaders to curb the excesses of their employees, highlighting alcohol and whiskey as the proponents of moral degradation and the enemies of industry.119 Both the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League were buoyed by the increased activism of women, and the visible work of the groups reinforced the gendered idea of a woman’s sphere. Both groups were careful to keep among their membership women who were perceived as “pure, pious, domestic, and submissive,” and their concerns were always couched in moral and, often, Biblical terms.120

The Anti-Saloon League was also savvy in the art of pressuring politicians: systematically separating legislators who were compliant with their cause (willing to vote for prohibition even if they personally drank, like Senators Cole Blease and John Sharp Williams, who claimed his personal stockpile would see him through any prohibition121) from those who they sought to remove from office. Anyone who spoke out against prohibition, for myriad reasons, were called “wets,” and their opposition was linked to immorality and permissiveness. However, John Kobler wrote that the opposition, especially those outside of the alcohol industry, were steadfast but not as well-organized as either the Women’s Christian Temperance Union or the Anti-Saloon League. They also underestimated the prohibition groups’ resolve, unable to imagine that the legislation would actually pass and be enforceable.122

Anti-Saloon League ministers bragged that the roads were lined with the gravestones of politicians who had opposed their efforts, but accusations that they were steam-rolling the process were fair. Rather than putting the issue on the ballot in a referendum, the Anti-Saloon League applied pressure to legislators to pass laws, thus limiting the number of men the group would have to actively court and threaten. The Anti-Saloon League remained single-minded and their goal was clear: an amendment to the Constitution to prohibit the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcohol. The movement was buoyed by recent amendments to the Constitution, for federal income tax and the direct election of senators. This would, however, be the first time the Constitution was amended to modify personal behavior, an alarming development to prohibition’s opponents (particularly Catholics and Jews who wondered if religious affiliation could one day be targeted in such a manner). As a response to criticisms of the law’s overreach, there was a clause in the final bill presented to Congress to allow for consumption of alcohol in domestic areas, but it was symbolic only.

Prohibitionists made the most of World War I’s rationing and propaganda efforts, making alcohol consumption not only immoral behavior but un-American and unpatriotic. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels consented to prohibitionist efforts in major cities and around military camps to install “dry and decent” zones, closing saloons within five miles of base camps. When the war ended, prohibitionists were able to make the case that America had reduced alcohol consumption and been the better for it.

123 Kobler, Ardent Spirits, 216; Sinclair, Prohibition, 68; and Kerr, Organized for Prohibition, 192-193.
125 Sinclair, Prohibition, 117-118; and Kobler, Ardent Spirits, 206.
The Eighteenth Amendment was ratified in January 1919, with it going into effect in January 1920. Pointedly, the amendment did not outlaw alcohol but prohibited the sale, manufacture, and transportation of intoxicating drinks. The amendment did not spell out enforcement, so the Volstead Act was passed in October 1919, prohibiting all drinks with more than 0.5% alcohol.\(^{126}\) The passage of both laws meant that, on the surface, the issue was settled, with the prohibitionists able to claim victory. But problems of enforcement remained.

In the 1920 election, prohibition played an important role. James Cox, the Democratic nominee, was personally opposed to prohibition, an issue he was clear about when running for the Ohio governorship in 1918 (though, notably, he did support a measure to close saloons on Sundays in Ohio). Cox also made clear that he believed the people of Ohio did not support the measure, but rather, it was the work of powerful and well-funded interest groups. Once the measure passed in Ohio, Cox transitioned into enforcement mode, winning high praise from the prohibition groups. This was lost on most of the newspapers, which emphasized his opposition to the measure, with the *Milwaukee Sentinel* declaring “The Wets Won!” and the *Chicago Tribune* calling Cox “the ‘wettest’ candidate in sight” among others.\(^{127}\) Cox insisted throughout his nationwide tour that he would “enforce the laws of the land, as I have enforced the laws of the state of Ohio,” but he was dogged by accusations from Anti-Saloon League leader Wayne Wheeler that he was weak on enforcement. Notably, the Anti-Saloon League endorsed Warren Harding, who was flagrant about both his opposition to prohibition and consistent consumption of whiskey. Cox’s running-mate, Franklin Roosevelt, had the *bona fides* on the issue, having


endorsed the prohibition movement in New York and working to defeat a plank at the 1920 Democratic Convention that sought to weaken the Volstead Act.128

Cox made several statements throughout his national tour, but he clearly believed that the issue was settled and a distraction from the League of Nations discussion. At one point, Cox’s composure broke and he revealed his anger: he was confounded by the widespread support for the “sphinx,” referring to Harding’s practiced silence on the issue (and all issues, for that matter). It was likely an error that, to that point, Cox avoided addressing Harding’s practiced indifference on most of the major issues, but Cox was determined to run a clean, uncontroversial campaign. It was also unsuccessful. Prohibition was not the reason James Cox lost the election, but clearly, the Democratic candidate’s inability to gain traction for his nuanced position was troubling for the party.129 Twenty years later, Cox was still angered and in disbelief, especially at Harding’s supporters starting a rumor that he was a drunk, while Harding’s use throughout his presidency was a guarded secret until his death in 1923.130

The Ku Klux Klan.

The most pressing and damaging issue for the Democratic Party in 1924 was the re-emergence and domination of the Ku Klux Klan. In its second iteration, the Ku Klux Klan presented itself as a fraternal organization, and the group broadened its animus from targeting African-Americans to including immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and other minorities as enemies of their cause. Deeply popular in rural areas throughout the country, the Ku Klux Klan counted among its members several self-identified Democrats, and their prominence at the Democratic

129 Stone, *They Also Ran*, 31. For Cox’s response to prohibition on his national tour, see Faykosh, “Front Porch of the American People,” 81-84.
Convention in 1924 would create a polarizing moment for Democrats moving forward: how to deal with the Ku Klux Klan and Klan support. Almost every letter returned to Franklin Roosevelt expressed some sentiment about the Klan; truly no Democrat was ambivalent about the presence of the Klan in their midst.

The first Ku Klux Klan (named for the Greek words for “circle” and “loyalty”) was short-lived, but destructive, terrorizing newly freed slaves and their supporters especially in the South in the aftermath of the Civil War. Officially designated a terrorist organization by a federal grand jury, the Klan was mainly a network of small, self-ordered groups comprised mainly of former Confederates, but their target was shared between the different enclaves. The Klan was responsible for attacks on formers slaves, firing guns into the homes or burning them to the ground, forcibly denying them access to vote, or in their most visible demonstrations, lynching. These attacks served to reinforce the dominance of former Confederates, and Democrats, as they sought to reclaim the hierarchy the Civil War took, and sent a warning to freedman and those sympathetic to them. The Klan ceased to function on a wide scale after the Civil Rights Act of 1871, though isolated attacks, mainly in rural areas throughout the South, continued. When Reconstruction ended, however, the Klan was no longer as necessary, as voter intimidation, lynching, and Jim Crow laws filled the void.131

The second iteration of the Ku Klux Klan emerged at the end of the 1910s. The most popular film of the decade had been the D.W. Griffith epic Birth of a Nation, based on the novel The Clansman by Thomas Dixon (the film was also originally called The Clansman). The film is split between life during the Civil War and Reconstruction for two families, with the heroes of the second section being the Ku Klux Klan, revenging the attempted rape and suicide of Flora

Cameron (the young daughter of one of the families) with the murder and celebrated lynching of her attempted freedman rapist and the rescue of Elsie Stoneman (daughter of the other family) as she was being gagged and bound at the hands of a corrupt government official. The film glamorized the efforts of the Klan, with their white robes featured prominently throughout and on the cover of the promotional posters.\textsuperscript{132}

The film famously had a private screening at the White House, as author Thomas Dixon was eager to have the association between the president and the film as an endorsement. Famously, Dixon spread a quotation attributed to the president (denied by Wilson and Secretary of Navy Josephus Daniels, who was present at the screening): “It is like writing history with lightning. My only regret is that it is all so terribly true.” Dixon, a former classmate of Wilson’s, had played fast and loose with the president’s words before. In the silent film, intertitles displayed text sourced to Woodrow Wilson’s 1902 five-volume work, \textit{A History of the American People} (in particular, Volume 5: \textit{Reunion and Nationalization}). The most egregious example changed Wilson’s mostly balanced account of the Klan’s rise into an endorsement from the sitting president.\textsuperscript{133}

Wilson used historical perspective when evaluating the Klan (also, against his own experience, as a Southerner): “(The Klan had been) a very tempting and dangerous instrument of


\textsuperscript{133} An example of the alteration: Wilson wrote in \textit{History of the American People}, 58-60, “The white men of the South were aroused by the mere instinct of self-preservation to rid themselves, by fair means or foul, of the intolerable burden of governments sustained by the votes of ignorant negroes (sic) and conducted in the interest of adventurers; governments whose incredible debts were incurred that thieves might be enriched...” “Year by year the organizations spread...Every countryside wished to have its own Ku Klux Klan, founded in secrecy and mystery like the mother ‘Den’ at Pulaski, until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, an ‘Invisible Empire of the South,’ bound together in loose organization to protect the southern country from some of the ugliest hazards of revolution.” This was altered to read, on screen: “The white men were roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation...until at last there had sprung into existence a great Ku Klux Klan, a veritable empire of the South, to protect the Southern country.” Melvyn Stokes, \textit{D.W. Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation”: A History of “the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time”} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 198-199.
power for days of disorder and social upheaval...Men of hot passions, who could not always be restrained, carried their plans into effect. Reckless men, not of their order, malicious fellows of the baser sort who did not feel the compulsions of honor and who had private grudges to satisfy, imitated their disguises and borrowed their methods...Brutal crimes were committed; the innocent suffered with the guilty; a reign of terror was brought on and society was infinitely more disturbed than defended.”134

The film was an enormous financial success and planted seeds of revisionism with the Ku Klux Klan as heroes. Later in 1915, Leo Frank, a young Jewish man in Marietta, Georgia, was accused in the death of his employee, Mary Phagan. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison after civil liberties groups protested his death sentence. A local mob, outraged at the commutation of his death penalty, took matters into their hands and lynched Frank, his Jewish heritage no doubt playing a large role in his treatment. Thomas Watson, former leader of the Populists and a Congressman in 1915, called on a revival of the Ku Klux Klan to restore home rule.135

Months later, these events inspired a meeting at Stone Mountain, Georgia, by William Joseph Simmons and fifteen others. The group decided to take Watson’s (and others’) advice and revived the Ku Klux Klan, with Simmons as their leader, and set as their tenets opposition to African-Americans, Jews, Catholics, and immigrants under the umbrella term “100 percent Americanism.” They also decried the rapid urbanization of cities, where the Great Migration transformed communities that had been majority-white and were now torn by racial and ethnic tension.136 Historian Craig Fox wrote, “the Ku Klux Klan perceived rampant corruption and

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135 McVeigh, Rise of the Ku Klux Klan, 20.
136 Hofstadter, Age of Reform, 291-295; Grantham, Life & Death of the Solid South, 79-80; McVeigh, Rise of the Ku Klux Klan, 2-10, 183; Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 74-83; and Horowitz, Inside the Klavern, 2-3, 15-
disquieting sense of moral crisis with bootlegging, smut, and petty crime supposedly raging unchecked. An apprehensive white Protestant America looked on as Victorian moral values and traditional family roles decayed...the blame for cosmopolitan squalor, vice, and illegal alcohol trafficking could be laid firmly at the feet of morally ‘inferior’ foreign doctrines imported with recent Catholic and Jewish immigrants.”

The Klan was successful in attracting large participation throughout the South and Midwest, owed in part to feeding on the tensions of the era, but also in Simmons and others modeling Klan activities on other fraternal groups popular at the time. The distinctive white robes and large rallies, called Klaverns, complete with the notorious burning cross, celebrated the pageantry and tradition of membership. The Klan wanted to present itself as a family affair, and had specific groups dedicated to females and children sympathetic to the Klan cause, or at least, related to a Klan member. The Klan fed on areas torn by provincial isolation and ignorance, but also owed to the development of fundamentalism and the suspicion and fears of cosmopolitan values overtaking the perceived traditional values. Lawrence Levine wrote: “Both movements warned stridently of a grave threat to America’s heritage and destiny, praised education and feared intellectuals, placed greater faith in instinct than in reason, deified the common man, defended the Scriptures as established truth which needed no amplification, appealed to the rural and small-town American, were built upon the Yankee Protestant ethos, and above all, both movements attempted to preserve a way of life which was being eroded rapidly

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138 Finan, Alfred E. Smith, 175-179; Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 83-85; and McVeigh, Rise of the Ku Klux Klan, 2-4. For the Klan’s recruiting efforts and attempt to mirror fraternal organizations, read “How to Recruit a Klansman” in McVeigh’s Rise of the Klansman, 139-166.
by the ‘acids of modernity.’” 139 There was also a class component, as the majority of Klansmen were underpaid and undereducated (and unorganized, as a middle class), whether in cities or in rural areas. 140

The Ku Klux Klan aligned with the Protestant ethos, and the group found a calling in enforcing the new prohibition laws, alongside clean politics and limiting European immigration, calling as their enemy: “the corrupt politician, the major vices, the bootlegger, the moonshiner, the radical agitator, and the alien.” 141 On this note, the Klan was a success, making explicit the link between alcohol use and the other social ills that plagued America in the 1920s. In Dixon’s The Clansman, the freed slaves were not only half-human, but indulged in alcohol to accelerate their baser impulses, forever linking the dual threat of cheap alcohol and the freed black man. 142

The Klan also targeted the Catholic Church, whose opposition to the amendment had been well-known and interrogated, but were now treated as permissive and immoral: a parade in Portland, Oregon, featured a Klan Cyclops with the slogan “The only way to cure a Catholic is to kill him.” 143 The Klan and the prohibition groups proved mixed company, as the Klan and Anti-Saloon League co-sponsored parades and other activities together (in rural Michigan, for instance, the Klan and Anti-Saloon League co-sponsored a Prohibition Jubilee for “the birth of Prohibition and the death of King Barleycorn”). The female arm of the Ku Klux Klan, called the “White Cloud” also had overlap in membership between their group and the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. At the least, the groups shared goals, if not ideology and practice. 144

139 Levine, Defender of the Faith, 256-257; and Horowitz, Inside the Klavern, 2-4.
141 Fox, Everyday Klansfolk, 2-4.
142 Okrent, Last Call, 42-43.
144 Al Smith wrote about the lead-to the 1924 Democratic Convention: “The Klan and anti-saloon forces were practically identical.” Smith, Up to Now (New York: Viking Press, 1929), 287; Jackson, Ku Klux Klan in the
This version of the Klan was well-organized, and there was coordination between the member groups, linking the goals and practices of the efficient Klan of Indiana and Michigan with the Klan groups throughout the South and in places as disparate as Oregon and Oklahoma. In a particularly striking development, the Klan turned to political activities to assert their position on the major issues of the day, all while maintaining a firm “non-alliance” strategy. The Klan did not want to force members to abandon long-standing party loyalties, for fear that the Klan would lose to the tradition of party identity. This development was particularly troublesome to Democrats, as there was a significant overlap between Southern Democrats and Klan membership; should the Klan organize as efficiently and quickly as they had over the first seven years, the Democratic Party was in significant trouble. Yet the Klan was firmly opposed to the influx of immigrants into Democratic ranks, and would work to transform the party from within. The major problem for the Klan was that it was single-minded in its approach to membership, remaining clear on who was accepted for membership and who was perceived as the enemy, and their message was threatening to those who were opposed to their mission, and even those who were undecided but suspicious or concerned about the effect of this organization on society.145

Al Smith, the governor of New York and one of the front-runners for the presidential nomination, earned particular enmity from the Klan. He represented everything the Klan hated: he was Catholic, the proud son of an Irish immigrant, a reform-minded politician, and he was honest about his frequent drinking.146 Bishop James Cannon sought to embarrass Smith, preparing a report on enforcement in New York City as a reflection on Smith. He traveled to

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saloons in Harlem, pointedly focusing on immigrants and African-Americans, seeking to reinforce stereotypes and tensions Klan members and others would have against the city, immigrants, and African-Americans: “Governor Smith wants the Italians, the Sicilians, the Poles, and the Russian Jews. We shut the door to them. But Smith says ‘Give me that kind of people.’ He wants the kind of dirty people found today on the sidewalks of New York.”

As governor, he was faced with the difficult state legislation, known as the Mullan-Gage law, which would have provided the state of New York with additional state police and sheriffs dedicated to policing prohibition. Smith was caught in a difficult position: if the legislation was repealed, it was feared it would antagonize drys, while if it failed, it would antagonize his wet supporters. Mullan-Gage was eventually repealed, citing the Volstead Act as sufficient, but the damage to Smith’s reputation as enforcer (as Cox had tried to position himself in 1920) was done.

As the Democratic candidates headed to New York City in June 1924 for the convention, the Ku Klux Klan was determined to have their voice heard and for Smith’s career to be destroyed.

For the Democratic Party heading to Madison Square Garden for the 1924 convention, there were deep schisms dividing the party. It was unsurprising that the convention would reveal the tensions, but the degree to which the party unraveled and left deeply wounded was cataclysmic. The convention’s destruction was the visible symbol of an underlying disease, and the ensuing election would prove just as disastrous. It was only in the aftermath, when Franklin

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Roosevelt began planning his political comeback and sought to reform the party, that the
Democratic Party was able to search for a direction forward once again.
CHAPTER II. A RETURN TO THE RING: FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT IN 1924

The Democratic Party was in chaos going into the 1924 Democratic Convention, and Franklin Roosevelt’s political career was in similar disarray. In 1920, he was a Democratic star on the rise, following his famous cousin’s first steps by transitioning from Cabinet position as Assistant Secretary of the Navy to running as the vice presidential nominee. Roosevelt demonstrated his effectiveness as a political player, matching his running mate, James Cox, step-for-step across the country as they waged a difficult campaign to win the White House in a difficult year for Democrats. When Cox lost, as expected, nobody blamed Roosevelt and many expected Roosevelt to be a future candidate. But, a polio attack in the summer of 1921 nearly destroyed Roosevelt’s life and certainly damaged his political career. He dedicated his entire attention to recovering the use of his legs, using braces to begin making public appearances and battling the perception that he had disappeared from the public sphere. As the 1924 Democratic Convention approached, Roosevelt had no designs on becoming a candidate for any position, consistently rebuffing any overtures with his continued dedication to walking again. While he would not run for office in 1924, his record and name were still important, and his fellow New Yorker, Governor Al Smith, desperately needed his endorsement to mollify Democrats scared of his pro-wet record, his Catholic faith, and his immigrant background.

Roosevelt’s performance at the 1924 Democratic Convention was nothing short of legendary. His nominating speech bolstered Smith’s candidacy without damaging Roosevelt’s reputation with McAdoo or Davis supporters, and Roosevelt was the only person who left New York City in better political standing than he entered. Roosevelt maximized his exposure and newfound position within the Democratic Party to continue his re-emergence and after the election, his Circular Letter positioned him as a leading Democrat. Roosevelt’s Circular Letter...
was not in itself revolutionary, but the responses demonstrated a party on the brink and in
desperate need of a revolutionary leader. Roosevelt used his evolving beliefs on the party’s needs
and traditions and the responses from delegates to chart a future for the Democratic Party.

In this chapter, I analyze Franklin Roosevelt’s political evolution, from his youth through
1924, as he developed his position within the party and ideas about government. In particular, I
focus on Roosevelt’s conception of his affiliation with the Democratic Party as he climbed the
political ladder. I also analyze the impact of Roosevelt’s recovery from polio, as the attack left
Roosevelt at a crossroads, unsure of his status in the party or his political future. The chapter is
divided into four sections: the first details Franklin’s upbringing, personally and politically; the
second details Franklin’s emergence as a political player; the third details Franklin’s nomination
as vice president in 1920; and the fourth details the polio attack and his struggle to return to
political prominence on the eve of the 1924 Democratic Convention. I detail Roosevelt’s
political rise and the impact of his polio attack to inform Franklin Roosevelt’s interest in
returning to the political sphere at the Democratic Convention in 1924 and his motivations for
writing the Circular Letter in December 1924 (detailed in Chapter IV). After corresponding with
members of the Democratic Party, Franklin Roosevelt emerged with a clear direction on where
the Democratic Party was broken and how he could help fix it, setting the stage for a party
reformation that would bring both Roosevelt and the Democratic Party to prominence for a
generation.

**Formative Years: Family Background and Youth**

Franklin Roosevelt’s upbringing did not naturally lead him to identifying as a Democrat
all of his life. In fact, the Circular Letter appears to be one of the first times that Roosevelt truly
considered what made Democrats different from Republicans, and how that could be reflected
within the party’s policies and communication to voters. In the aftermath of the Circular Letter, Franklin Roosevelt confronted his ideology and sought to provide a substantial history that Democrats could reflect.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was born into a life of immense privilege on January 30, 1882, in Hyde Park, New York, the only son of Sara Delano and James Roosevelt (who had a son from a previous marriage). Both Sara and James were from wealthy families and considerable trappings. The Roosevelt family had a long history in the state from its Dutch roots, with two factions: the Hyde Park Roosevelts and the Oyster Bay Roosevelts (like Theodore, Franklin’s fifth cousin, older by twenty-four years\textsuperscript{149}). James Roosevelt was a railway man, president of Southern Railway Security Company and vice president of the Delaware and Hudson Railway, and he lived down the road from Hyde Park, the summer retreat of the Vanderbilt family and a short distance from the Hudson River Railway that directly connected Hyde Park to New York City. James was fifty-three years old when Franklin was born, while Sara was only twenty-eight, a difference compounded by James’ various health problems. Franklin’s youth was dominated by emotional distance from his aged father and the intense interest that Sara paid her only child.\textsuperscript{150}

Franklin, in later years, tried to pin-point his family’s association with the Democratic Party, especially after learning that his great-great-grandfather Isaac Roosevelt served as a New York state assemblyman during the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, representing New York City in the ratification proceedings for the Constitution. Franklin sought in vain to find an

\textsuperscript{149} In fact, Sara and James met at a celebration to honor Theodore Roosevelt’s 1880 graduation from Harvard and were married later that year.

association between his hero, Thomas Jefferson, and his ancestor, but there was no tie between the two men.\textsuperscript{151}

Franklin believed that his father was a life-long Democrat, but James experimented for a time with the Whig Party, which was pervasive in the North as he was coming into the business world. In Before the Trumpet, Geoffrey Ward cited a letter between James and his father, Isaac, referencing the impending election of Zachary Taylor and James’ support for “your old friend Henry Clay.” James stayed with the Whig Party until its dissolution, and faced a decision as the 1856 election approached. James was an old friend of James Buchanan’s from time spent in England when Buchanan was ambassador to the Court of St. James, and Buchanan’s consistent urging of moderation in the face of the Republican Party’s near-fanatical and disjointed attack on slavery likely eased James’ conversion to Democrat. James struck up a friendship with General George McClellan (the failed 1964 Democratic nominee) while the two men were in London after the war, and James’ devotion to the Democratic Party took permanent root. Still, James remained loyal to the Union throughout the Civil War, and he was horrified by Lincoln’s assassination.\textsuperscript{152} Like his son, James Roosevelt’s ties with the Democratic Party, and politics in general, relied far more on personal friendships and associations than any deep ideological foundation.

In the aftermath of the war, Roosevelt’s landholdings and position with the railroad made him a prized New York Democrat, and he lent his support to fellow Bourbon Democrat Grover Cleveland as he ran for governor of New York in 1882 and president in 1884. When Cleveland became president, James turned down an offer to serve as Ambassador to Holland, but was

\textsuperscript{151} Ward, Before the Trumpet, 17-18.
\textsuperscript{152} Frank Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 5; and Ward, Before the Trumpet, 34-37, 44-46.
delighted when his older son, James Roosevelt, Jr., was appointed to a diplomatic post in 
Vienna.\textsuperscript{153} James temporarily moved his wife and Franklin to Washington D.C. in 1886, as he 
attempted to use his political connections to further a business venture: entreating Democrat 
Congressmen to help him lobby the Nicaraguan government for access to land for a canal. It was 
unsuccessful, but Roosevelt remained loyal to his fellow Democrats. He asked Grover Cleveland 
for a private meeting, so young Franklin could meet the president. When they arrived at the 
Executive Mansion, they were ushered to the second floor, where President Cleveland’s private 
study was located. After a trying day, Cleveland patted young Franklin on the head, telling him 
“My little man, I am making a strange wish for you: It is that you never be President of the 
United States.” The meeting made an impression on young Franklin, even if he ignored the 
advice.\textsuperscript{154}

As a youth, Franklin Roosevelt’s family had immense wealth, but he had little interaction 
with children his own age. His parents indulged his hobbies, and he collected stamps, model 
ships, and other items. He accompanied his parents on their travels and interacted with wealthy 
and famous men and women, meeting, among others, Mark Twain, Don Pedro (exiled emperor 
of Brazil), Princess Helena (Queen Victoria’s daughter), and the Duke and Duchess of Rutland. 
As a result, young Franklin grew accustomed to other languages and cultures. He had infrequent 
contact with the Oyster Bay Roosevelts, but they thought he was prissy and spoiled, a reputation 
he spent much of his youth trying to shake. His father loved to sail, and Franklin became 
enamored with the workings of ships both large and small. He read hundreds of books on naval

\textsuperscript{153} Ward, \textit{Before the Trumpet}, 135-137.  
\textsuperscript{154} Ward, \textit{Before the Trumpet}, 124.
history and sailing, and nursed an ambition to join the Navy (which his father firmly
discouraged).155

Roosevelt’s privilege afforded him many luxuries, and he, like the sons of many other
“Gold Coast” families, was sent away to a private school education. Sara and James sent
Franklin to Groton School, an Episcopalian school in Groton, Massachusetts, founded by
Endicott Peabody, who served as headmaster. Peabody wanted his school to emulate the British
boarding school experience he had as a youth, while emphasizing the burgeoning philosophy of
“muscular Christianity” and service to others. His students, all boys, lived in cold, spare
bedrooms and famously took cold showers twice a day, no matter the season.156 Their rigorous
classes combined with a high level of competition in the school’s many extra-curricular activities
and sports. Franklin’s parents held him back two years, sending him at fourteen when most of the
other students started at twelve.

Understandably, for Franklin, Groton was an immense culture shock. He was used to
being the only child and having very little interaction with people his own age, and the Groton
experience was a far cry from his pampered existence. Franklin was homesick for Hyde Park, but
determined to be a good student and make friends (he wrote to his parents, proudly, when he
received the “Punctuality Award,” endearing him perhaps to teachers if not his fellow students).
While other students ridiculed him at first, for his accent, the closeness to his parents, or his
over-eagerness to be included, he won them over with hard work. He served as manager for the
school baseball team, providing as much enthusiasm as though he were on the field.157 In this

155 H.W. Brands, Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano
Roosevelt (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 23-24; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny, 6-7;
and Ward, Before the Trumpet, 126-128, 138-139, 173.
Harold F. Gosnell, Champion Campaigner: Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), 13-
14; and Ward, Before the Trumpet, 170-171, 178-182.
157 Tugwell, Democratic Roosevelt, 27-30; Brands, Traitor to His Class, 24-27; and Ward, Before the
early experience, Franklin demonstrated qualities that served him throughout his life: maintaining a pleasant disposition no matter how difficult the circumstances, and working hard to compensate for people’s initial mistrust.

Franklin also notably retained pride in his Democratic upbringing, even in the face of Groton students’ overwhelming Republican ties (he claimed to be the sole Democrat at Groton all four years). Indeed, Theodore Roosevelt, a rising New York Republican and close friend of Peabody, was also an early supporter of the school, sent both money and his own sons to burnish the school’s reputation. He spoke on the campus several times to the students, emphasizing the same standards that Peabody hoped Groton students to emulate, and serving as an example of the life of service in action. In one instance, Theodore came to speak immediately before being appointed to the Navy Department, and he personally invited Franklin to a Fourth of July celebration at Oyster Bay, which his mother received and rejected on Franklin’s behalf. Franklin chastised his mother, eager to spend time with his cousin and his family.\(^{158}\) When Theodore ran for governor upon his triumphant return from Cuba in 1898, Franklin wrote that at Groton, “We were all wild with delight when we heard of Teddy’s election.”\(^{159}\)

Endicott Peabody remained an unparalleled influence in Roosevelt’s life: Franklin once commented that besides his parents, Peabody made the biggest imprint on Roosevelt’s character. Peabody’s constant stressing of service induced Roosevelt to attend Peabody’s religious courses, participate in summer camps for underprivileged youth, and even join a missionary group, where he learned empathy by taking care of an African-American woman for an entire winter,

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\(^{159}\) Burns, *Roosevelt*, 25.
supplying her with food and fuel. With Peabody’s direction and care, young Franklin Roosevelt transcended his patrician upbringing to truly learn how other people lived and survived, an invaluable experience especially later in his career. While Peabody’s politics leaned to the Republican Party, he did not direct students’ political awareness in any appreciable way. Importantly, Franklin’s admiration of both Endicott Peabody and Theodore Roosevelt, both lifelong Republicans (though Theodore’s own loyalty to his party would be debated) demonstrated Franklin’s penchant for putting personality before politics, a feature that would endure throughout his political career. While he was undoubtedly intelligent, Franklin Roosevelt was also more concerned with the personal aspect of politicians and public figures than with policy discussions or nuances.

Like nearly everyone at Groton, Franklin applied and was accepted to Harvard, and he eagerly attempted to emulate his cousin by attempting to join the dining club Theodore Roosevelt joined, the Porcellian. His rejection haunted him for decades—he told a friend during his presidency that it was the worst moment of his life. As at Groton, Franklin earned a reputation at Harvard for being pleasant, but not trustworthy, and he was not popular. He found his niche in the *Harvard Crimson* offices, where he put his bookishness and hard work to good use. While at Harvard, Franklin received word that his father passed away, and he used his Groton training to handle the blow with comportment, another trait that served him well when he was stricken with polio in 1921.

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161 Notably, Peabody did not vote for his famous student when he ran for President in 1932, believing Herbert Hoover to be the “abler man,” but was ferociously defensive of Roosevelt’s administration and made Roosevelt the guest of honor at Groton on several occasions; Ward, *Before the Trumpet*, 206-209.  
Franklin’s political views were undoubtedly shaped by his relative’s rise. In 1896, Franklin had been, like his father, cautious of William Jennings Bryan’s candidacy (evidenced in Franklin’s letters to his parents), as Bryan’s campaign presented a different Democratic Party than James’ friend, Grover Cleveland. James was quietly relieved when Bryan was defeated, believing that would be the end of the Populist influence in the Democratic Party. In 1900, the decision between the Republican and Democratic tickets was even more challenging for the Roosevelts. With Vice President Garret Hobart’s death, William McKinley needed to fill the office, and his close friend and advisor Mark Hanna suggested Theodore Roosevelt. Throughout Theodore Roosevelt’s political career, he served as a thorn in the side of the Republican Party establishment. He was outspoken in fomenting military intervention in Cuba and dropped his position as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in order to lead a band of former soldier and sheriffs, called the “Rough Riders” to dubious military notoriety. When his campaign ended, Theodore returned to New York to run for the governorship, as the Republicans were in danger of losing the statehouse. He barely won, but his victory assured that he would have an increased profile in the Republican Party, an opportunity Roosevelt took full advantage of in criticizing the McKinley administration. His position on McKinley’s ticket assured that the administration would lose one of their insurgent critic’s voices. William McKinley’s re-election campaign resembled his first bid, as he stayed in Canton for the duration. Roosevelt launched his own tour, utilizing his enormous popularity and newfound military service to corner Bryan as unpatriotic or even cowardly in his criticisms of the McKinley administration.

The campaign tested Franklin Roosevelt’s party loyalty. Until Theodore was nominated, Franklin had made his allegiance to the Democratic Party clear to fellow students at Groton and

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Harvard; but now, after his cousin was tapped for the ticket, he switched affiliation. He was still unable to vote, but he helped organize events for the Harvard Republican Club, marching in McKinley/Roosevelt parades on the Harvard campus, drawn more by his bloodlines and hero worship of Theodore Roosevelt than by any true change in ideology. In letters to his mother, Franklin was excited as it became clear that his cousin was sure to be elected, and he was undoubtedly cognizant of the effect the family’s prestige would have on his Harvard reputation. Franklin scored a major scoop for the Crimson when he asked the president of Harvard, Charles William Elliot, whom he was voting for, off the record. Hearing the Republican ticket, Roosevelt proceeded to share the news with the campus anyway.165

Theodore Roosevelt became president just six months after he became vice president, when an assassin murdered William McKinley in Buffalo. Suddenly, Franklin’s famous cousin was the President of the United States and there were distinct perks that accompanied that position. When Theodore’s strong-willed daughter, Alice, demanded a proper debutante’s ball, she got her wish and the invitations were highly prized. Franklin was one of the lucky few who secured one, and he was delighted to spend time in Washington for the party. When Franklin was able to talk to his famous cousin alone, his future aspirations came into full view and he returned to Harvard ebullient and inspired by his interaction with the president.166

Franklin graduated from Harvard in 1902 and began law school at Columbia (the transition from Harvard to Columbia was yet another way Franklin followed cousin Theodore; also like Theodore, he dropped out of law school after becoming disenchanted167). In 1904, when Franklin was able to cast a ballot for the first time, he voted for Theodore against Democrat

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166 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 31-32; and Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 151.
167 Burns, Roosevelt, 28-29.
nominee Alton Parker. Franklin later stated that his first and only time voting for a Republican
was because Theodore Roosevelt was “a better Democrat than the Democratic candidates.”

While at Columbia, Franklin met his distant cousin, Eleanor Roosevelt, on a train along
the Hudson and began courting her; the match was fateful. Eleanor played an integral role in
Franklin’s rise to political power and especially in his recovery from polio in the 1920s and the
cultivation of his political influence. During their marriage, Eleanor found her political identity
and she worked to develop the Democratic Women’s Caucus and acted as her husband’s eyes
and ears.

Franklin and Eleanor were distant relatives, of course, and her father, Elliott, was
Theodore’s younger brother (incidentally, he actually served as Franklin’s godfather). Like
Franklin, Eleanor learned grief at a young age. Her mother died of diphtheria after the birth of
Eleanor’s younger brother and her father disappeared from her life, exiled by his family over his
crippling alcoholism. Just two years after her mother’s death, Eleanor’s father jumped from a
window and died days later. Eleanor was sent to live with her grandmother and her relatives
made sure she had the best education possible (she attended school in London for much of her
youth). She stayed in contact with her uncle as he made his dramatic rise to power.

Franklin and Eleanor kept their courtship a secret, mainly because they knew how
Franklin’s mother would react. To Sara, no woman would be good enough for her only son, but
she also believed he needed someone of distinction, and Eleanor’s life to that point had been
filled with terrible sadness and considerable depression. Still, Eleanor was charming, if quiet,

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169 Eleanor’s father was extremely devoted to his daughter, writing her nearly constantly from his exile in
Virginia, but Eleanor’s mother made known her disappointment in her daughter’s appearance and personality; she
nicknamed her “Granny.”
170 Joseph P. Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1971), 39-58; Brands,
*Traitor to His Class*, 34-38; Burns, *Roosevelt*, 26-28; and Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with
and demonstrated the intellectual spark that would serve her future. Franklin was smitten. They secretly became engaged shortly after their meeting, and Sara sent Franklin on a Caribbean cruise in hopes of changing his mind or giving him time to sort things out, demanding they not announce their engagement.\(^{171}\) He returned more determined than ever to marry Eleanor, and the wedding was set for St. Patrick’s Day, 1905. At Eleanor’s request, and to Franklin’s delight, her uncle Theodore agreed to give away the bride at her wedding (he offered to let them marry in the White House but Eleanor demurred).\(^ {172}\) Franklin prized a letter of congratulations from Theodore, in which the president wrote: “We are greatly rejoiced over the good news. I am as fond of Eleanor as if she were my daughter, and I like you, and trust you, and believe in you. No other success in life—not the Presidency, or anything else—begins to compare with the joy or happiness that come in and from the love of the true man and the true woman…”\(^ {173}\)

Franklin’s prized mentor, Endicott Peabody, served as the officiant, ensuring that Franklin was surrounded by the people who most shaped his upbringing and the man whom he most hoped to emulate. The wedding was held in Eleanor’s grandmother’s home and attended by several dozen people, including Franklin’s former neighbors, the Vanderbilts. Of course, the president was the featured guest and celebrant, much to the amusement of Franklin and the relief of still-shy Eleanor. Guests followed Theodore from room to room to shake hands, and he had to be coerced into watching the cutting of the cake to make sure that the guests did, too.\(^ {174}\)

Franklin and Eleanor started marriage with homes in the Upper East Side (which Sara paid for on the condition that she could buy the apartment next door and retrofit the two suites


\(^{172}\) Her cousin, and Theodore’s daughter, Alice Lee Roosevelt, served as a bridesmaid, and later noted with delight how she tried to scandalize Eleanor with discussions of sex.


for constant access) and the Springwood home in Hyde Park (where Sara slept down the hall). Franklin and Eleanor welcomed two children while he was still in law school before dropping out in 1907 and joining the firm Carter Ledyard & Milburn for corporate work. While they lost an infant son, they would eventually have five children, one daughter and four sons.  

While working at the law office, Franklin began formulating ideas about his political future. It was here that he first voiced that he was emulating, down to the schools he chose, his famous cousin, and he stated that he believed it would lead him all the way to the White House. From this point, he pointed out, he needed to run for the New York general assembly, be appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy, elected as governor of New York, vice president, and eventually, president. That he would do most of these things, although not in this order, is remarkable, but it was all the more so because his mother was against the idea of him going into politics altogether. Theodore Roosevelt was, up to that point, truly the outlier in the family, as the Roosevelts had contented themselves with contributing to society without sullying themselves with the dirty world of politics. Once Theodore opened the door, however, Franklin was more than eager to continue in his path.

Theodore Roosevelt left the presidency for a famed retirement in 1909, and Franklin immediately sought his advice (through an intermediary, Theodore’s sister) on his own political future. Republicans controlled Dutchess County for decades, but Franklin sensed an opening in running for New York State Senate. Theodore told his sister that while he wished Franklin were a Republican, he thought he would make an excellent politician.  

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175 Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 43-49.
New York were delighted at the prospect of cashing in on the famous last name (literally, in some cases, as Democratic funds were tight and Franklin’s family would be self-funding the materials for his race). Franklin even had practiced lines and jokes: When asked his relation to Theodore, he answered with a joke: “Fifth cousin by blood, and nephew by law,” and shared an anecdote where he told a little boy that he could tell Franklin was not Theodore “because I don’t show my teeth.” He elaborated on their differences in an interview with the New York Times: “Who can help but admire him? I differ with him on a great many questions, but they are differences between men who are both seeking to do their best for the public good. Only he is doing it the Republican way while I am trying to do it the Democratic way. It is a difference in method growing out of fundamental difference in party faith, that’s all...I am a Democrat first, last, and all the time.” Franklin was determined to match his name recognition with hard work, and planned to visit every house in his district. He easily won election in the Democratic sweep of 1910, and Roosevelt immediately set to work to prove himself in the statehouse.

For Democrats in New York, political fortune was dependent on fidelity to the powerful Tammany Hall. But in the progressive reforms of the early 1900s, some Democrats began to point out the excesses and corruption, sparking real reform in the way Tammany functioned. Roosevelt sensed an opening with William Randolph Hearst’s pointed criticism of Tammany and Charlie Murphy, the effective party boss. One of the first orders of business for the New York General Assembly was to select the United States Senator from New York, with Tammany’s endorsed candidate William Sheehan as the perceived front-runner. Roosevelt objected to

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179 Gosnell, Champion Campaigner, 30.
180 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 52-54; Burns, Roosevelt, 30-34; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny, 18; Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 169-170; Roosevelt, This is My Story, 166-167; and Tugwell, Democratic Roosevelt, 67-70.
Sheehan’s association with Tammany and led an insurgent group of other like-minded senators who were willing to back a reform candidate, forcing Sheehan to withdraw his candidacy after a prolonged stand-off. Roosevelt ultimately won the battle, but had made an enemy out of Tammany.\textsuperscript{181}

This incident demonstrated what would soon be a hallmark of Roosevelt’s political life, as he was frequently impulsive and single-minded. Rather than taking the temperature of the State Senate or understanding what his role in that body was going to be, Roosevelt staked his future on a tenuous issue, risking the enmity of a still-powerful party machine. He paid for this action down the road, when Tammany blocked his nomination to the U.S. Senate in 1914, but Roosevelt recovered. He ultimately learned how to deal with the party machinery, and Tammany was in the midst of a transformation that would ease Franklin’s concerns with the organization.

In the General Assembly, Franklin also met Al Smith, a young politician from New York. Smith served as an example of Tammany’s burgeoning progressivism when he successfully pushed for labor reform in the aftermath of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Smith and Roosevelt ascended in the New York Democratic Party together, with Smith gaining power early, and Roosevelt gaining later, and more permanently. Their political careers were entwined throughout the 1920s and the devolution of their personal relationship marked the Democratic Party’s turn to electoral powerhouse.\textsuperscript{182}

Franklin’s grandstand earned him considerable statewide and national publicity within days of beginning his elective political career. Theodore Roosevelt sent his congratulations for


his principled effort, while Franklin also attracted the attention of the New Jersey governor, Woodrow Wilson. Whether this was another opportunity where Franklin attempted to parrot his cousin’s behavior with his political party or not, Franklin earned the same level of polarization within his party as Theodore had in his: those who supported him and viewed him as a star on the rise or a principled reformer, in most cases, became lifetime supporters. Those who viewed his actions as self-serving, needlessly political, or lacking in any appreciable forethought were implacably mistrustful and wary. Franklin’s actions served notice to the Democratic Party machinery that Franklin Roosevelt would, one way or another, find his way to political fortune. The question remained whether he would take his party with him.

Franklin Roosevelt’s Political Debut

Franklin Roosevelt’s transition to politician was difficult: he struggled to identify his place within the Wilson administration and how to work constructively with people within his own party. Roosevelt’s interest in advancement, understandable as it was, helped to inform the way he was viewed by others within the party and why he was cast aside after his illness and paralysis. Examining Roosevelt’s one major political office held prior to his election as governor and then president is instructive to understanding his eagerness to be taken seriously in 1924 and his concern with providing steady and productive leadership with his Circular Letter.

As Franklin Roosevelt faced re-election to the New York State Senate in 1912, the Democratic Party delegates were facing a difficult choice between Speaker Champ Clark and New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt had several meetings with Wilson and became enamored of his progressive leanings and endorsed his candidacy at an early stage. Even Theodore Roosevelt’s bid as the founder and candidate of the Progressive/“Bull Moose” Party

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could not dissuade Franklin from his efforts to support Wilson. He campaigned vigorously throughout New York, even as he was running again for the State Senate. He was careful throughout, however, to not position his appeal against his cousin, but focused instead on the positive effects of a Wilson presidency. Towards the end of his State Senate campaign, Franklin and Eleanor fell ill with symptoms of typhoid, and relied on the work of Louis Howe, Franklin’s self-appointed assistant. Though there were tensions between Howe and Eleanor for influence in Franklin’s inner-circle (and would be for a decade), Howe proved invaluable in getting Franklin re-elected and remained a permanent confidante as Franklin Roosevelt rose to power. He proved essential to helping Franklin maintain his political career after his polio attack in 1921.184

When Wilson was elected, he was quick to reward the young Roosevelt. Some ambassadorships were floated, but Franklin accepted the position of Assistant Secretary of the Navy, yet again like his cousin, Theodore. This move also fulfilled Franklin’s lifelong interest in naval ships and sailing, hobbies he nursed while a youth with his model ships, postage stamps and paintings, and thousands of naval books, and an opportunity to fulfill his youthful ambition to join the Navy.185 This love for the navy and its trappings mirrored his cousin’s and put him at odds with the new administration. In particular, his boss, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels wanted a smaller navy, and tasked Franklin with the relatively mundane tasks of ordering supplies to prevent him from meddling in the decision-making. Undaunted, Roosevelt relished the opportunity, remarking that he “got his hands in everything.” He enjoyed talking with Navy men, whose lingo he knew well and he presented a much more personable figure than Daniels.

184 Julie M. Fenster, FDR’s Shadow: Louis Howe, the Force that Shaped Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 93-96; Brands, Traitor to His Class, 66-71; Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 282-283, 292-293, 301-302; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Rendezvous with Destiny, 22; Gosnell, Champion Campaigner, 44-45; and Roosevelt, This is My Story, 190-194.

185 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 23-24; Cross, Diplomatic Education of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32-33; Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 304-305; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Rendezvous with Destiny, 10; and Ward, Before the Trumpet, 158-161.
His boss also noticed the ambition in Franklin Roosevelt’s eyes: when they posed for an official portrait in the State, War, and Navy Building above the White House, Daniels later wrote that he knew he could never live there but that Franklin knew it was completely within his grasp.186

In 1914, Roosevelt’s political ambition nearly sidelined his career. Without informing Wilson or even Daniels, Roosevelt entered his name for the Democratic primary to become the United States Senator (the first election after the passage of the 17th amendment). Without Wilson’s blessing or endorsement and with his earned enmity from Tammany Hall, Roosevelt was truly set adrift in New York. Without any backing from prominent Democrats, Franklin was soundly defeated in the Democratic primary. He remained in his post at the Navy Department duly chastened, and he and the rest of the department turned to Wilson’s re-election efforts. Roosevelt again supported Wilson but was not able to campaign as much due to his role in Washington.187

After Wilson was re-elected in 1916, it became clear that war was imminent. Roosevelt repeatedly urged both Wilson and Daniels to allow him to begin outfitting fleets for warfare, and even asked for a commission so he could fight once the war began. Like his cousin Theodore, Franklin desperately wanted to be seen as a war hero, and he plotted opportunities to resign and enlist. He could not secure a commission, and Wilson urged him to stay in place at the Navy Department, so Roosevelt focused his attention on the German strength during the earlier part of the war: submarine warfare against British and American vessels. At Roosevelt’s urging, the British began mining strategic parts of the sea, thwarting the German submarines in the process.

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Roosevelt traveled to Britain and France to inspect the American naval ships in person, and he
lobbied Wilson successfully to provide supplies to the merchant marine to aid the effort.\textsuperscript{188}

As 1918 approached, Roosevelt once again turned his attention to electoral ambitions,
with some friends urging him to run for the governorship. Again, Wilson urged Roosevelt to stay
put, and Roosevelt obeyed. As the war closed, Roosevelt fought consistently to keep the naval
operations from being completely shuttered, pointing to the great need faced at the beginning of
the conflict to outfit the ships. Wilson’s attention, by this time, was devoted entirely to the
League of Nations crusade. The Roosevelts traveled to Europe at the close of the war to begin
inspections of the American naval installations, and were in France while the Versailles
conference was taking place. He was sailing to Europe when he and Eleanor received word that
Theodore Roosevelt had died at sixty years old, shattered by the news that his youngest son,
Kermit, had died while flying over France.\textsuperscript{189} Franklin was able to have several sessions alone
with Woodrow Wilson while in Europe, particularly at the end of journey. Most of these
discussions revolved around the League of Nations and the fight Wilson faced upon his return,
and he was successful in winning Roosevelt’s support for the plan. Franklin became very ill on
his return from Europe, with reports of his condition ranging from the Spanish influenza which
was decimating the American military to “double pneumonia.” In any event, Roosevelt’s illness
triggered memories of his exhaustion at the end of his 1912 State Senate run, when he was
unable to fulfill his campaign duties, and he again relied on his able assistant, Louis Howe to
step in and manage. Roosevelt recuperated, but this episode also portended his eventual
destructive illness.\textsuperscript{190}

\textsuperscript{188} Brands, \textit{Traitor to His Class}, 96-100; 104-106, 108-111; and Freidel, \textit{Franklin D. Roosevelt: A
Rendezvous with Destiny}, 30-32.
\textsuperscript{189} Lash, 228-230; and Roosevelt, \textit{This is My Story}, 274-275.
\textsuperscript{190} Roosevelt, \textit{This is My Story}, 288-289.
Eleanor proved indispensable in his recovery, but she was nursing a serious personal blow. After they returned from Europe, Eleanor found letters between Lucy Mercer, Franklin’s personal secretary, and Franklin, and she confronted her husband. After Eleanor threatened to divorce, Franklin promised her that he would never speak to Lucy again. Sara prevailed upon Eleanor to consider Franklin’s political prospects: divorce was simply out of the question for a political aspirant. Sara offered Eleanor financial security in the form of a trust if she stayed with Franklin, and she threatened to disinherit Franklin if he left Eleanor. Their marriage would never return to the way it had been before, and Eleanor never truly trusted Franklin to avoid indiscretions. But this incident freed her to begin pursuing projects that she was truly interested in and in which she could invest her time. By 1924, she would be considered a leading Democratic figure in New York, and among women nationally. The Roosevelt marriage resembled a political partnership from this point forward, with two partners united in shared vision, if little else. As Franklin was about to descend into the darkest period of his life, he would rely on Eleanor’s determination to resurrect his political fortunes.191

1920 Vice Presidential Bid: The Star Emerges

Franklin Roosevelt was taken seriously at the 1924 convention and in his Circular Letter only because of his bid as James Cox’s running mate in 1920. With Roosevelt’s performance throughout the difficult campaign, Roosevelt proved his substance and that he was loyal to the party and a rising star. While his illness and paralysis caused party leaders to question his future, for many voters and the general public, Franklin Roosevelt’s image was set in his energetic and loyal campaigning throughout 1920.

Franklin Roosevelt showed up at the 1920 Democratic National Convention in San Francisco, California, in late June as a delegate representing New York and a representative of the Wilson administration. There was, however, considerable distance between Roosevelt and the president himself, owing to a speech Roosevelt made in February 1920 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Recent reports in the New York Times had been critical of the Wilson administration’s preparation for the war effort as well as its ability to spend appropriately, with Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels earning almost the entirety of the blame. Rather than backing his boss, Roosevelt used the opportunity to trumpet his dedication to “government efficiency.” In the speech, he criticized the “hesitancies, the doubting timidities, and ‘idealistic nonsense’” of both Daniels and Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt was quickly made persona non grata by the Wilson White House, and Daniels felt betrayed, debating resigning his post in protest. As the Wilson administration came to a close, it was evident that Roosevelt was willing to distance himself from the president if the need arose, even if it meant hurting his mentor Daniels.

Wilson was silent on his desire to run for a third term but hoped that a deadlocked convention would result in his drafting, and he stymied the campaign of his son-in-law and perceived heir apparent, William Gibbs McAdoo. The gravity of Wilson’s stroke and illness was not well known, but Democrats across the country understood that he could not be their nominee for a third time. In a nod to Wilson’s legacy and import on the occasion, there was an unveiling of a giant portrait of President Wilson before the voting could commence. A spontaneous demonstration took place: delegates from individual states began marching around the convention floor, and in some cases, the entire delegation marched behind their banner-carrier, demonstrating support and loyalty to the ailing president (if not willingness to entertain a

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193 Gosnell, Champion Campaigner, 62-63.
fatalistic third-term bid). Within some of the delegations, intense arguments took place. There was confusion about what marching in the processional conveyed to the audience, but some delegates were unwilling to appear disloyal to the party leader and president.\textsuperscript{194}

The New York contingent, including Franklin Roosevelt, was deeply divided. He had pledged his support early to Governor Al Smith (despite his Tammany ties, the two men were both interested in progressive reform in the state), and he was preparing to deliver the seconding speech for Smith’s nomination. During the Wilson demonstration, however, Roosevelt was also conscious of his standing within the Wilson administration in light of his February address and the repercussions of appearing disloyal again. He seized the New York banner and began marching, forcing his fellow delegates to decide to participate or be left behind. This moment engendered loyalty among the pro-Wilson camp (and played a major role in his treatment later in the convention), but also again demonstrated Roosevelt’s deep-seated impulsive behavior, as he gave scant thought to how the moment would be perceived, or how it would affect his fellow New York delegates.\textsuperscript{195}

While the early balloting favored McAdoo, he refused to defy his father-in-law and removed himself from the proceedings (even if some states’ contingents continued to vote for him, or rather, refused to vote for his competitors). A battle of the governors took place, with Cox, Smith, and Edwards receiving strong delegate vote totals but not a majority. Finally, a compromise was reached, and James Cox was nominated. Cox was the first Ohioan nominated by the Democrats, though his state had been rich soil for the Republicans, with six presidents to that point elected from there, all Republicans. Cox had built a reputation as a progressive Democrat, which meant he largely followed the Wilson model of executive leadership. He rose

\textsuperscript{194} Burns, \textit{Roosevelt}, 72-75.
to prominence by advocating for the reform of Ohio’s schools and prisons, and helped alleviate a severe teacher shortage in the state. Though he opposed the prohibition amendment, he worked diligently to present himself as an enforcer, and would stress his sense of duty over personal reservations. As governor, he had been effective, if undistinguished, indicating the Democratic Party was willing to go in a new direction after Wilson’s tumult.

One of Cox’s immediate decisions after his nomination was selecting his running-mate. Since Grover Cleveland deferred to the convention in 1892, the subsequent Democratic presidential nominees allowed the delegates to also choose the vice presidential candidate without significant input. Cox changed this, advocating for Franklin Roosevelt to be selected. Franklin was nominated unanimously, by vote of acclamation. In a conciliatory move, Roosevelt left the convention at word of his nomination, but Josephus Daniels provided the acceptance speech, providing first-hand recollections of Roosevelt’s better virtues (a magnanimous move, given their tense relationship earlier in the year). Cox later wrote of his decision: “I told (Edward Moore, his manager) that I had given the matter some thought and that my choice would be Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York. Moore inquired ‘Do you know him?’ I did not. In fact, I had never seen him, but I explained to Mr. Moore that he met the geographical requirement, that he was recognized as an Independent, and that Roosevelt was a well-known name.” In The New Republic, Alvin Johnson opined that millions of voters would vote for Cox’s ticket “in the belief that Franklin Roosevelt is the son of T.R. and sole heir to his manly virtues.”

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197 Cross, Diplomatic Education of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 88-89.
198 James M. Cox, Journey Through My Years (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 232; Burns, Roosevelt, 73; Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 613; and Gosnell, Champion Campaigner, 63.
For Franklin, this was yet another, and perhaps the most difficult, opportunity to follow in his famous cousin’s footsteps. He readily accepted the nomination without much prompting, or consideration as to how shallow his record looked. He had held one elective office to date, a two-year term in the New York State Senate, and an eight-year perfunctory performance as Assistant Secretary of the Navy, but with little other than his last name to distinguish himself. What Roosevelt lacked in political or governing gravitas, he was determined to make up on the campaign trail.

Roosevelt’s enthusiasm for the position masked the insecurity that the office held for a burgeoning political career. The office of the vice president was still not that highly prized and certainly was not used as a consolation prize to the other major candidates (the first time it would be used as such was when Roosevelt did it himself, asking Speaker John Nance Garner to join his ticket after he finished second at the convention). Few vice presidents made any appreciable impact outside of their stated role as president of the Senate (where they could cast tie-breaking votes when the need presented itself); most were forgotten to obscurity, the office allowing them to maintain a presence in Washington without any real power. John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Andrew Johnson, and Chester Arthur were relative cyphers within their national parties, the nomination as vice president a formality, and not an indication of their political prowess beyond strategic geographic considerations (especially in balancing North and South as Fillmore and Johnson were meant to convey). When their presidents died in office, they each elevated to the office, facing immediate controversy regarding their fitness for the higher position. None of them won a second term; they also were rebuffed as their party’s nominee (John Tyler won a Senate seat as a Confederate, and Millard Fillmore sought the presidency again with the Know-Nothings, but neither was retained by the Whig Party). Franklin’s cousin Theodore was
nominated in this same vein, with Mark Hanna and the Republican Party leaders hoping to keep
the insurgent politician from criticizing the McKinley administration by making him a silent
figure within it. His nomination and election to his own term in 1904 was the first for an elevated
vice president, and ushered in a new appreciation for the possibility of the vice presidency.

Roosevelt accepted the vice presidential nomination with his cousin’s ambitious approach
in mind, not the passivity of the nineteenth century vice presidents. He suggested to Cox that he
wanted a larger role in the administration, relaying his interest in sitting in on the Cabinet
meetings and heading programs. Cox quickly put an end to this notion, citing a conflict of
interest between the vice president’s legislative branch duties, fearing that an elevated role within
the executive branch would be seen as spying, in his words a “White House snoop.”

President Wilson’s shadow loomed so large at the convention that one of Cox’s first acts
after being nominated was to visit Wilson in the White House, with Roosevelt accompanying.
Wilson had been incensed by Cox’s nomination (privately, he did not share his misgivings
publicly). Wilson was battling depression and felt that the convention proceedings were a
repudiation of all of his work as president. He sent only terse notes of congratulations, but
accepted Cox’s request for a meeting. It was the first time that Roosevelt had seen Wilson since
the paralyzing stroke, and he and Cox were both visibly shaken by the ailing president’s
condition. In grasping Cox’s hand, Wilson made the candidate promise to continue his fight for
the League of Nations. The press statements issued by both men reflect the competing goals each
had for the meeting. Cox claimed that he and Wilson agreed “on the meaning and sufficiency of
the Democratic platform and the duty of the party,” while Wilson claimed “[Cox] and I were
absolutely at one with regard to the great issue of the League of Nations.” Earlier in the year,

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200 Cox, Journey Through My Years, 238; and Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 615.
201 James Roosevelt, F.D.R.: His Personal Letters, 1905-1928 (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947),
in *The New York Times*, Cox discussed the League of Nations as one of the central issues of the 1920 election. He put his position solely in economic terms, discussing the reliance of the Midwest on strong relationships with Europe. After the meeting with Wilson, however, Cox’s hands were tied on the most important issue of the election.202

Governor Cox decided almost immediately after his nomination that he would launch an intensive campaign, and ambitiously proposed to visit every state. Of course, this would prove difficult to manage, and he eventually abandoned a swing through the South in order to maximize his exposure in the West.203 Franklin Roosevelt coordinated with the Cox campaign beginning a tour in the west and then traveling eastward. Roosevelt spent two weeks traveling through California and other western states with Eleanor beside him (still shy, she did not make speeches but helped Franklin with crafting his texts and offering general advice).204 Eventually, the two men planned to cross paths and switch coasts. While Roosevelt estimated that he gave over a thousand speeches during the campaign, other estimates were more conservative, putting it at seven or eight speeches a day for several weeks.205

Along the campaign, Franklin became used to people mistaking him for Theodore’s son. The press reported that Franklin was met with comments like “I voted for your father” and “You


204 Davis, *FDR: Beckoning of Destiny*, 621-622; Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 250-258; and Roosevelt, *This is My Story*, 313-320.

are just like the Old Man.” To offset the confusion, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., dogged his distant cousin at the Harding campaign’s request, issuing the firm statement: “He is a maverick, and he does not have the brand of our family.”

One particular area where Roosevelt helped the Cox ticket was on the issue of prohibition enforcement. As the campaign proceeded, the Republicans continued to label Cox as a wet, an allegation he could not seem to shake. Prohibition officials in New York heralded Roosevelt as a staunch dry, citing his legislative record as a state assemblyman in the Albany statehouse where he frequently pushed for stronger prohibition laws, and his work with Secretary Daniels to keep alcohol out of the vicinity of military bases. He substantiated this reputation at the nominating convention with his efforts to defeat a plank in the 1920 Democratic Party platform that called for easing implementation of the Volstead Act. Throughout his campaign tour, Roosevelt reassured rural voters that Cox would enforce the law.

One notable incident plagued Roosevelt for the remainder of the campaign and informed his studied and distant relationship with the press. In a moment of relative boastfulness, he improvised an answer to a question about the League of Nations in Butte, Montana. Someone pointed out that the former British Commonwealth could unite in the new League and overrule the United States, but Franklin said it would be the opposite. The Latin American countries looked to the United States as “a guardian and big brother,” and would vote as America directed. He continued, “Until last week, I had votes myself, and now Secretary Daniels has them. You know that I had something to do with the running of a couple of little republics. The facts are that I wrote the constitution for Haiti myself, and if I do say it, I think it is a pretty good constitution.”

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It was a careless error, and an easily disprovable one, and he immediately recanted. Notably, the Associated Press did not dispatch a reporter to follow Roosevelt, so the story did not appear throughout the country, but it was enough of an error for Cox’s opponent to comment on it. Senator Harding stated that he would not disparage a burgeoning nation or nominate for the vice presidency anyone who inflated his role. The other, long-lasting side effect was that Roosevelt from this point forward became intensely scripted in his relationship with the press, especially where discussions of the League of Nations were concerned. As with his running mate, the issue was a complete non-starter and they could only repeat the same practiced lines.208

Their campaign ended in defeat, as almost everyone knew it would. Franklin took it with an extraordinarily positive attitude. While Cox could not necessarily be blamed for the Republican takeover, his running-mate was heartily acquitted of any fault. Roosevelt’s term at the Navy Department ended when he began his run for the vice presidency, so he returned to Hyde Park after the election to plot his next political move. He received many welcome letters congratulating him on his effort, and Franklin took care to preserve the names and addresses of all of the contacts his vice presidential bid had helped him amass, to use at a future time.209

There was still a controversial matter to take care of. As his term in the Navy Department ended, a scandal was brewing. Reporters were investigating allegations of homosexual behavior between sailors in the Navy and civilians in Newport, Rhode Island. Roosevelt resigned to run for the vice presidency as the investigation (which he approved based on a detective’s recommendation) went to Congress. In June 1921, he testified to a committee about the actions

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208 Burns, Roosevelt, 75-76; Cross, Diplomatic Education of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 101-103; Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 621; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny, 39; and Gosnell, Champion Campaigner, 66-67.

209 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 140-141; Cox, Journey Through My Years, 279-280; Cross, Diplomatic Education of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 106-107; Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 622-623, 625; and Tugwell, Democratic Roosevelt, 127-129.
he and Josephus Daniels took upon hearing the report, but both were consistent in viewing this as an isolated incident and pointing to the negative effects that publicity about the trial could provide. Roosevelt rejected the condemnation of the Senate committee, pointing to how political their rebuke became: two Republicans used the opportunity to condemn Daniels’ and Roosevelt’s leadership (so soon after his failed vice presidential bid), while the sole Democrat criticized using the Navy to air political grievances. The damage to Roosevelt’s career might have been worse, but he was soon distracted with something much, much worse.\(^\text{210}\)

**Setback: The Polio Attack**

Franklin Roosevelt’s career and life changed drastically in August 1921. Near death, his political career was put out of mind as he struggled to survive. In the aftermath, Roosevelt began trying to sort out the new reality of his illness and what it meant to his political career. The illness and recovery raised the stakes of Roosevelt’s appearance at the 1924 Democratic Convention, and Roosevelt carefully charted his future based on the tremendous response he received. Roosevelt’s paralysis and ensuing struggle inform his dedication to reclaiming his position within the party and finding a way to identify himself by his political leadership rather than being defined by his illness.

Throughout Franklin Roosevelt’s life, Campobello Island had been a favorite refuge. He and his family decamped to the island, located in Canadian waters, in the summer of 1921, shortly after his Senate rebuke. There, Franklin indulged his love of sailing, passing on his expansive knowledge to his sons and daughter, enjoying the cool air away from the stifling heat of the Hudson River valley.

On August 10, 1921, Franklin and Eleanor were sailing with his sons and daughter on the Bay of Fundy. They sailed all day in familiar waters, and on the way back, noticed a forest fire on a nearby island. Franklin and his sons sprang into action and they worked for two hours, stamping the fire out as best they could with branches and water. Exhausted, they decamped to a familiar watering hole, jogging two miles across Campobello Island, where the water was frigid, the perfect salve to their overheated bodies. From there, they ran back across the island, approximately one mile, to another beach with warmer waters, and then back home.211

Roosevelt’s children ran inside and changed into dry clothes, but he stayed on the back porch, reading mail. Eleanor tried to get him to change clothes but he complained of being too exhausted. While the rest of the family prepared for dinner, Roosevelt said he was not feeling well, and was experiencing chills. Franklin believed rest would cure his discomfort and he retired up the stairs to his room. It was the last trip up the stairs under his own strength. He attributed his pain to lumbago, general discomfort in the back, but the chills and pain lasted through the night.212

In the morning, Franklin was unable to walk or feel anything on one leg. Despite Eleanor’s efforts to massage away what might have been muscle tension, he remained immobile (her massaging actually worsened the infection). They called a doctor, who was unfamiliar with the symptoms Franklin was experiencing and could recommend only rest. The Roosevelts panicked as the condition only seemed to worsen. It was also difficult to call medical professionals without alarming the children or indicating to others that the situation was really so grave. But the paralysis kept spreading, to Franklin’s legs, his chest, his face, and eventually, his

211 Lash, *Eleanor and Franklin*, 267; and Roosevelt, *This is My Story*, 329-330.
212 Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 145-146; Tugwell, *Democratic Roosevelt*, 139; and Roosevelt, *This is My Story*, 330.
organs. For weeks, he required catheters and was unable to make any bowel movements. Through it all, he maintained hope that this was a passing illness and that he would recover fully, while doctors scrambled to identify the cause for Roosevelt’s rapidly deteriorating condition.\footnote{Burns, \textit{Roosevelt}, 86-87; Lash, \textit{Eleanor and Franklin}, 267-268; and Roosevelt, \textit{This is My Story}, 331-333.}

Finally, Roosevelt received the devastating diagnosis. He had contracted a strain of poliomyelitis, which the doctors called “infantile paralysis.” It was unclear how to treat or cure the paralysis, as nothing could be done to the muscles besides using them, and Roosevelt was unable to even move at this point. His facial paralysis lessened, as did the tension in his chest, and he was able to make bowel movements again, but his legs never regained full use. Within weeks, a neighbor suggested he try swimming, and there, Roosevelt was able to first encounter the therapeutic qualities of swimming on his inability to walk. In water, he was able to hold his weight with his legs, and he committed himself to swimming his way back to health.\footnote{Lash, \textit{Eleanor and Franklin}, 268-270.}

There was conjecture about the root cause of Roosevelt’s contracting the strain. Growing up in a sheltered environment at Hyde Park, where his only contact prior to Groton (besides intermittent family visits) was among adults, Roosevelt simply was not exposed to diseases, and had a low immunity as a result. When he went to Groton, he was frequently sick, as the large number of pubescent boys exposed him to all form of viruses and illness, and the same was true of his time at Harvard.\footnote{Brands, \textit{Traitor to His Class}, 27.} As an adult, he was exhausted to the point of serious illness in 1912, as the re-election to the State Senate wound to a close, leaving his assistant Louis Howe to finish his campaign for him. When he returned from Europe in early 1919, he was nearly hospitalized for the “Spanish flu” or “double pneumonia” (depending on the reports), and Eleanor nursed him.
back to health. Weeks before his attack, he had visited a Boy Scouts camp in New Jersey and possibly contracted the disease there.

Through all of the tribulations he faced, Roosevelt maintained a positive attitude, rarely cluing in those around him to the gravity of the situation. Only when he was alone, or with Eleanor, was he direct about the insecurities and fears he had about his illness and future. This has been attributed to his upbringing: he learned at a very early age to mask any inner turmoil and respond with good cheer, and he responded to this illness in much the same way he responded to the other setbacks he had experienced. What letters he sent and preserved render him unknowable: very rarely did Roosevelt commit what he actually thought to paper. Instead, he almost always conveyed to his reader what he thought he or she wanted to learn.216

In the months after his attack, Franklin Roosevelt slowly started to recede from the public as he concentrated all of his efforts on regaining the use of his legs. Newspapers reported Roosevelt’s illness, but the details were still murky and it was unclear exactly what had happened and what the long-term impact would be. Louis Howe worked relentlessly to ensure that newspapers would not print “infantile paralysis,” for obvious reasons, or link his illness to polio, for existing fears that that polio would be linked to poverty. “If (the word ‘paralysis’) is printed, we’re sunk. Franklin’s career is kaput, finished,” Howe wrote.217 By the end of August, Howe’s efforts of misinformation or containing the truth paid off, as the New York Times printed that Roosevelt was quickly recovering from a nasty bout of pneumonia and would “definitely not be crippled.”218

216 Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 269.
217 Hugh Gregory Gallagher, FDR’s Splendid Deception: The Moving Story of Roosevelt’s Massive Disability—and the Intense Efforts to Conceal it from the Public (Arlington, VA: Vandamere Press, 1999), 16-17; Davis W. Houck and Kiewe, FDR’s Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 16-17; and Brands, Traitor to His Class, 149-150.
218 Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Rendezvous with Destiny, 41-43; Gallagher, FDR’s Splendid Deception, 19; and Houck and Kiewe, FDR’s Body Politics, 18-19.
Franklin Roosevelt responded to correspondence he received, mostly from former associates and well-wishers who sent hopes for a quick recovery that was not in the offing. Roosevelt and his family moved to New York City for a time, where he had better access to doctors and treatment, but the mechanics of moving him around were difficult (especially as Franklin was consumed with avoiding any press attention). Louis Howe came to live with the family for a time, and he and Eleanor worked out a pattern where both tended to Franklin, offering Eleanor much-needed relief. Franklin was fitted with leg braces and a wheelchair, confining devices that he detested and committed to discarding once he was better.219 The New York Times devastated the operation when it published a report in late September that confirmed the rumor of polio, and the Roosevelts and Howe, freed of the efforts to keep the story from the headlines, could now turn to his future.220

Politically, things were kept quiet. Sara hoped that the illness would return Franklin to her former ambition: that he would return to Hyde Park, family in tow, and settle into the landed elite lifestyle that she and her family had always been accustomed to. It was a credit to Louis Howe and Eleanor that these plans did not materialize, as they kept their fingers on the pulse of New York state politics and the Democratic Party operations nationwide, and they were determined to keep Franklin’s options open. It was clear that he was truly happiest, like his cousin, when he was “in the arena,” and a retirement from his passion would possibly be the worst solution to a once-vigorous man going through a personal calamity. Roosevelt engaged in some duplicity with his fellow New York Democrats when they floated the idea of him running for Senator or Governor in 1922. He had been telling friends and family, who were concerned about his actual


health, that he was near walking condition again, but he told officials he was too ill to travel, let alone run for office. His fib was designed to buy him time, as he, with Louis and Eleanor, strategized to ensure that he did not over-extend himself, or perhaps worse, commit to a losing proposition.\(^{221}\)

Al Smith and Franklin Roosevelt began engaging in active correspondence, with Franklin urging Smith to run for the governorship in 1922 (and Al Smith wanting to appear as though he needed drafting by fellow New York Democrats), after a close defeat in 1920, speaking on behalf of other Democrats. Roosevelt offered a letter, distributed to the press, stating that he was speaking for Democrats, as well as honest Republicans and Independents who needed Smith’s “honest, clean and economical government.” This letter proved invaluable to Smith as his own political career was at a crossroads, and the endorsement helped seal his nomination as governor. For Franklin Roosevelt, it made him a political player again in New York Democratic Party politics, but it also tied him expressly to Al Smith.\(^{222}\)

For Eleanor, this was the biggest step forward in a steadily developing life of service. In their first years together, Eleanor was content to follow her husband’s lead, but that had changed drastically. First, Franklin’s affair with Lucy Mercer freed Eleanor from having to be subservient to Franklin’s desires; their relationship was freed from romantic involvement and focused on a professional relationship of mutual respect. Second, as Franklin became incapacitated due to his illness, it was left to Eleanor to aid him, physically and emotionally, and to serve as his eyes and ears politically. She also served as gatekeeper of sorts, sorting what he was able to do from what


was asked and expected by those unfamiliar with the gravity of the situation. Finally, Eleanor
developed causes that were important to her and found her own voice within the growing and
multidimensional Democratic Party. She found herself aligned with most of the liberal New
York Democrats who advocated a progressive agenda, and female and male Democratic leaders
alike sought her counsel.

Franklin Roosevelt spent the better part of the next two years in different forms of
treatment. He became used to his leg braces, even when some of them were over ten pounds of
iron around his legs. At Hyde Park, he spent days trying to walk from the front door to markers
placed in the driveway. He committed to developing his upper-body, to be able to maneuver
himself in bed, to ease in and out of wheel chair, and to support his weight on crutches. His
biggest hope was still in the restorative waters, especially when he was advised to visit the
community in Warm Springs, Georgia. There, the waters were naturally heated and helped make
him buoyant, and he was determined to spend as much time as needed to regain use of his legs.
He used some of his mother’s money to begin refurbishing the bucolic community, and create a
lasting mecca for those with the same affliction.

It was in this community, and among other people who suffered from his condition, that
Franklin Roosevelt developed a working knowledge of a whole subset of people otherwise
overlooked by those in power. Until this point, Roosevelt’s life had consisted of moving from

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223 In 1920, she brought up her political conversion: “I was brought up a staunch Republican—and turned
Democrat. I believe that the best interests of the country are in the hands of the Democratic Party, for I believe they
are the most progressive. The Republicans are—well, they are more conservative, you know, and we can’t be too
conservative and accomplish things.” The reporter, from the Poughkeepsie Eagle News, noted that Eleanor was not
like other wives (her smile was “not the set, vapid smile of one who assents pleasantly,” and marveled at how
frequently Franklin entered the study during their interview to ask her advice. Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 252.
224 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 148-149, 160-161; Burns, Roosevelt, 90-91; Davis, Beckoning of Destiny,
673-675; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Rendezvous with Destiny, 35-36; Lash, Eleanor and Franklin, 259-264,
277-284; and Roosevelt, This is My Story, 323-327, 346-348.
225 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 162-167, 178-182; Tugwell, Democratic Roosevelt, 142-143; and Houck
one privileged place to another, but now he was thrust into a community filled with people whose ambitions were marked by their limitations, and whose voices were marginalized by their condition. It is inconceivable that Franklin Roosevelt would have learned true empathy if not for this predicament, but he soon became an advocate, both by example and in practice, of the handicapped. In later years, of course, Roosevelt was able to speak eloquently for better conditions for the aged and the infirm, and of the role of the government to provide comfort to those in need. These were all lessons he experienced firsthand in the quiet community of Warm Springs.226

It was also in Warm Springs where Franklin Roosevelt was able to appreciate the particular tensions that Southern Democrats felt. Until this point, Roosevelt had nursed ideas that his father was a sort of “Southerner-in-exile,” that aside from the institutionalized racism or Civil War grudges, his father would have fit in more with the landed aristocracy of the South than the Republican people he found in Dutchess County. Being a part of the Wilson Cabinet and spending so much time with Josephus Daniels, there was likely exposure to the particular inequality many Southern Democrats felt about their position within the party, but Roosevelt had never spent much time in the South until he went to Warm Springs. In his letters, he often referred to understanding the South much more after his recovery began, a political salve for his future political ambitions.

As 1924 neared, Franklin Roosevelt focused his energy and attention on recovering the use of his legs and the ability to walk. Al Smith’s bold candidacy and “favored-son” status at the New York City convention necessitated a decision on Roosevelt’s part. Smith understood that he

226 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 181-182; and Burns, Roosevelt, 89-90.
needed Roosevelt’s support for his challenge, to allay the fears of Southern Democrats about the Catholic/son of an immigrant/wet. The convention was an opportunity to speak to the assembled Democratic delegates and would be Franklin Roosevelt’s chance to show that his illness would not sideline him from the party going forward. For many, the last time they saw Franklin Roosevelt, he was walking beside James Cox at the Dayton announcement rally, or rushing from one town to another with a smile on his face, the future of the Democratic Party.

Now, the future of the party, and of Franklin Roosevelt and his role in it, were far less certain. As the delegates arrived in New York City, tensions mounted as the party split in myriad directions and emotions ran high. For Roosevelt, a disastrous outing, or underwhelming (or worse, overly sympathetic and infantilizing) reviews could put a quick end to any future he held within the Democratic Party and the nation. The 1924 Democratic Convention marked the return to the political sphere of one of the most dominant politicians in American history, and Franklin Roosevelt soon started charting a way to maintain momentum and party leadership as the Democrats descended into chaos, resulting in the Circular Letter.
CHAPTER III. THE GATHERED STORM AND TURNING POINT: THE
DEMOCRATIC IMPLOSION AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

The Democratic Convention of 1924 was the turning point for both the Democratic Party and Franklin D. Roosevelt. For Democrats, the convention at Madison Square Garden was their nadir, as a prolonged nominating process and a disastrous attempt to curb the Klan’s influence nearly tore the party apart. Adding to the party’s division was that this debacle exploded in front of the largest audience possible with a raucous crowd in the gallery and a substantial radio public. For Franklin Roosevelt, the convention represented a turning point: his return to the arena. His speech nominating Al Smith was his first official public appearance since his polio attack three summers before. For an always-ambitious man like Roosevelt, the speech offered a way back to prominence after a possibly life-defining setback, and he was determined to make the most of his opportunity in spite of the risks involved.

Warren Harding’s abrupt death in August 1923 while touring the West Coast left the political world in shock. Suddenly, vice president Calvin Coolidge was thrust into the presidency, and left to clean up the mess his predecessor left behind. Harding’s incredible lack of judgment allowed for numerous scandals, his misplaced trust (or delegating, as he was charitably credited) was abused by some of his closest confidantes, including Interior Secretary Albert Fall. Fall was charged with turning government land over to private companies, most notably the Teapot Dome preserve in Wyoming. While his death exonerated Harding, it was unclear what the political fallout would be for his successor, the taciturn Coolidge. Before Theodore Roosevelt in 1904, no ascendant vice president-to-president had been nominated by his party in the next election, let alone won the presidency in his own right, and Roosevelt did not have to clean up anything nearing Teapot Dome on his watch. The Democrats had a real opportunity to regain the
White House in 1924, just four years after Woodrow Wilson and the Democrats were ousted in a “return to normalcy.”

Instead, the Democratic Party imploded in their most spectacular debacle since 1860, when the party literally disintegrated along with the Union in sectional divides over slavery. By the time the 1924 Convention was through, the Democratic Party was unfit to go forward without a reconciling of the disparate factions and voices. The convention location in New York City laid bare long-simmering regional tensions between the growing urban wing of the Democratic Party and the increasingly-disaffected rural base which was previously prized by the establishment. The disastrous platform debate revealed lingering prejudices over several issues, and no clarity on what the party stood for or valued. The appearance and victory of the Klan in securing tacit approval from the party destroyed any chance Democrats had of enjoying widespread support of their constituency and independents. Finally, the interminable and exhausting manner in which the party deadlocked over the nomination process for 103 ballots sidelined the party’s self-appointed leaders and substituted an innocuous compromise candidate to carry the party standard.

For both the Democratic Party and Franklin Roosevelt, Madison Square Garden was the place where one party died and another was born. While scholars traditionally cite the 1928 election as a realignment and Franklin Roosevelt as a transformational figure (detailed in Chapter V), the seeds for those changes were evident in the 1924 Democratic Convention and Franklin Roosevelt’s response to it, evidenced in the Circular Letter. I focus on the different divisions within the Democratic Party, and followed through the proceedings here, with the attempted remediation by Franklin Roosevelt in his Circular Letter to follow. This chapter also interrogates Roosevelt’s role behind the scenes and within the Democratic Party in New York, as
he struggled to balance his partisanship, as an advocate for Al Smith, with an interest in leading his party during this disastrous convention and its aftermath. This chapter provides readers with the necessary context to understand the Circular Letter responses and Franklin Roosevelt’s urgency in writing the letter. The Madison Square Garden convention proved to be the lowest point for the Democratic Party in the twentieth century, and set the stage for the return of one of its most dynamic leaders, as Franklin Roosevelt began charting a way to unify the party for electoral success.

**Assembling in Manhattan**

Storm clouds loomed over the Democratic Party as delegates, leaders, potential candidates, and voters assembled in New York City in late June 1924 for the Democratic National Convention. In addition to anxiety over the presidential nominee, long-simmering tensions and divisions converged along with the attendees, with a referendum on the Klan’s influence in the Democratic Party scheduled. Franklin Roosevelt had a front seat for the action, serving as Al Smith’s floor manager and a delegate. He also wanted to use the convention as an opportunity to reintroduce himself to the Democratic Party, with his nominating speech and interaction with delegates and leaders.

In the weeks leading up to the convention, the Democratic Party created a festive atmosphere to welcome delegates from across the country. The choice of New York City as the host site for the convention was controversial, but strategic, and the result of a concerted effort by New York Democrats to put their state in political play again. Though the state of New York had only voted for a Democratic candidate four times since the Civil War (when New York governors Samuel Tilden and Grover Cleveland were the nominees, and in 1912, when Woodrow Wilson faced a split Republican electorate), the Democrats were heartened by a
growing Democratic constituency in New York City. These new Democrats (and new Americans, in many cases) represented a stunning contrast to the traditional Democratic support, and the party was beginning to wrestle with how to appeal to both its rural and urban constituency.  

Al Smith best represented the changing Democratic Party: brash and unpolished, Smith wore his Bowery roots as a badge of honor. He took pride in his contrast to other leaders: his lack of formal education, his association with party machinery, and most of all, his unrefined accent. His politics were unfocused: he dealt with the prevailing issues of the day, but he did not campaign on any platform or vision for the party or state. On the issue of prohibition, Smith faced a quandary: he was opposed to the measure and campaigned vehemently against it, but promised to enforce the laws as governor. His tenuous position, effective and respected among the immigrant constituency of New York, put him at odds with Southern Democrats who were steadfastly in favor of prohibition and wary of any perceived ambivalence towards enforcement of the law. To Southern Democrats, the Democratic Convention being awarded to New York City meant being forced to face the city most emblematic of vice and excess. In addition, Al Smith’s candidacy was a clear threat to the amendment that many worked so hard to achieve.  

The convention schedule was open-ended. The start date, June 24th, was well-publicized, but the rest would be made up according to the will of the majority of delegates. The previous conventions offered little in the way of what to anticipate: from 1876 to 1912, the Democratic Conventions had been tidy affairs. Samuel Tilden (1876), Winfield Scott Hancock (1880), Grover Cleveland (1884), and Alton Parker (1904), took two or less ballots to be nominated, while Cleveland (1888 and 1892) and William Jennings Bryan (1900 and 1908) were re-

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227 Murray, *103th Ballot*, 95-96.
nominated by acclamation. Only William Jennings Bryan’s first nomination, in 1896, required more than two ballots (five). Typically, the delegates could count on three days of participation: one on rule changes; one on the platform debates; and one to choose the nominee. Everything changed in 1912, when the convention stretched to seven days and forty-five ballots before settling on Woodrow Wilson. After Wilson’s quick re-nomination in 1916, the 1920 convention similarly stretched over one week, requiring eight days and forty-four ballots. As the delegates began arriving in New York City, many expressed optimism that the convention would take less than a week, while hotel managers boasted to the press that they would remain accommodating for as long as the convention required.229

The New York Times listed several events to welcome newcomers to the city during the event proceedings, ranging from visits to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, private lines running delegates’ families to Coney Island and the Statue of Liberty, a parade down Broadway, and several teas, hosted by Democratic Women’s Caucus members, including their chairwoman, Eleanor Roosevelt. Restaurants were encouraged to diversify their menus to welcome the delegates with their “back home dishes.” The police announced increased vigilance to “bunkos” (con artists) and pickpockets, and asked the Manhattan citizenry to welcome delegates with hospitality. Those same papers, however, also detailed the battles to be fought on the floor of Madison Square Garden, both in terms of the party platform battles and the decision for who would be the next nominee for president.230

Squaring Off: William Gibbs McAdoo vs. Al Smith.

One of the major complaints in the Circular Letter responses was that Democrats were too engaged in “boostering,” bringing front-runner candidates to the convention and forcing deep-seated resentments to a vote. This is a direct result of the process at the Madison Square Garden convention, as Democrats came to New York prepared for a prolonged battle between two candidates with complicated back-stories, and the rancor between them set the tone for a disastrous balloting process and especially the Klan debate.

There were two front-runners in the lead-up to the Democratic National Convention, as reported by *The New York Times* in its convention preview, along with dozens of others with the potential to spoil. William Gibbs McAdoo had dominated the handful of pre-convention primary elections, while Al Smith would be accorded “favorite son” status with the convention in his hometown. While both men had legions of supporters, they each carried enormous baggage that made their nominations questionable and their ability to be elected president challenging. Already there was speculation that the two-third vote requirement would damage the convention’s choice. Originally designed to send the nominee off with the secured blessing of a large majority of their party’s powerful, the polarity of the major candidates meant that two-thirds of the convention reaching the same conclusion was an increasingly unlikely event. It also meant that if a regional bloc, like the Southern Democrats, were dissatisfied, they could prevent an unsatisfactory candidate from getting the required threshold.231

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William Gibbs McAdoo entered the 1924 primary as the front-runner largely on the legacy of his father-in-law. McAdoo was a railroad man before being lured into public service by Woodrow Wilson, who asked him to serve on his campaign when he ran for president in 1912. Wilson rewarded McAdoo with the position of Secretary of the Treasury, and one year later, McAdoo married Wilson’s daughter at the White House. McAdoo was credited with the transition to the Federal Reserve System and he was instrumental in keeping the American economy afloat in the lead-up to World War I. He headed the Railroad Administration through the duration of the war, before leaving Wilson’s cabinet for a private law firm, with offices in New York City.

In 1920, McAdoo approached the nominating convention with trepidation. His name was among the leading contenders for the Democratic nomination, but his invalid father-in-law refused to endorse his candidacy. Wilson held out hope that his party would re-nominate him, an endorsement of support for his leadership over eight years, but with a growing backlash over his administration’s policies and his fatal stroke in 1919, the Democrats were keen to find a fresh nominee. Unwilling to cross Wilson, McAdoo quietly took his name out of contention, and he sat out the entire election. In 1922, he moved to California, continuing his law career but also seeking to begin a new political career in a new environment. A native Georgian, and with his father-in-law’s Virginian roots, McAdoo always viewed himself as a Southerner, and his move to California solidified his outsider status. His criticisms of the northeastern wing of the Democratic Party, especially on the issue of prohibition, intensified, and he actively sought the support of Southern and Western politicians and voters. His law firm was shrouded with scrutiny.

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232 Henry Ford briefly considered running for president, based on curious popularity for his xenophobic statements and unquestionable business acumen; he ended the speculation by claiming he would “never for a moment think of running against Calvin Coolidge”; Murray, 103rd Ballot, 37-38.
233 Craig, After Wilson, 32-35; and Murray, 103rd Ballot, 39-40.
following Warren Harding’s death and the exposure of the Teapot Dome scandal, when Edward Doheny (who was guilty of bribing Secretary of the Interior Albert Fall) was revealed to have kept McAdoo on retainer. Though McAdoo was not accused of any wrongdoing explicitly, Democratic opponents used the incident to attempt to stop McAdoo’s rise. As the convention loomed, he projected confidence that he could win over delegates and build on his Southern support by promoting his successes in speeches and personal persuasion among delegates. Privately, however, McAdoo and his advisors worried that they would never get the endorsement of two-thirds of the entire convention.  

Al Smith believed that his constituency represented the future of the Democratic Party, but it remained unclear if his political prowess in New York would translate to the broader party. He was disinterested in toning down his rhetoric and personal style, believing them to be part and parcel of his electoral success. Smith’s position on prohibition left him open to criticism, as well. Nathan Miller, governor from 1921-1923, campaigned in support of more vigorous laws to enforce prohibition, including the Mullan-Gage Act. Smith campaigned to take the governorship back in 1922, with repeal and replacement of Mullan-Gage as a major part of his platform. After election, Smith followed through on repealing Mullan-Gage, and abdicated enforcement to federal agents, thereby undermining the prohibition law. As the 1924 election approached, however, prohibition proponents increasingly derided Smith’s executive experience as one of lawlessness and personal excess, and questioning his respect for the laws that were in place.

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Smith had a smooth operation in anticipation of the convention, and his network was cognizant of the obstacles that Smith’s personality and record presented to the assembling delegates.\(^{235}\)

In the 1920s, presidential candidates still participated in the antiquated charade of being “drafted,” feigning disinterest in the nomination battle until the candidacy was secured. According to Michael McGerr’s *The Decline of Popular Politics*, this election marked the end of an era of remarkably high voter participation, in which partisan displays by the constituency on behalf of the candidate was pervasive. Increasingly, with the destruction of machine politics and bossism, the populace was less indebted to the national party and the contrived “spontaneous” displays on behalf of candidates began to disappear. As Presidents Roosevelt and Wilson expanded the role of the modern president, presidential candidates made more pronouncements and promises, and were held to a different standard on the fulfillment of their claims. Candidates needed to recalibrate their approach to voters, as they could no longer afford to rely on party machinery to connect with voters and needed to make the connections themselves. William Jennings Bryan grasped this change early and tailored his campaign to include personal appeals to the constituencies at play. In 1912, Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt both campaigned extensively: Wilson hoped to brand his New Freedom ideas in the minds of wavering Republicans while Roosevelt’s New Nationalism provided clear, concise policy changes that he would enact to distinguish himself from the Republican standard. Roosevelt was shot in a campaign stop in Milwaukee, but he was undeterred from campaigning among undecided voters and supporters.

In 1920, the contrast between James Cox and Warren Harding’s campaign strategies was stark. Cox launched the first nationwide tour, visiting thirty-six states while making over four

hundred speeches, while Harding stayed home in Marion, Ohio, and let the press come to him. While Harding was ultimately successful in a backlash election, it was clear that voters were growing wary of the one-sided nature of political support, demanding increasingly more from their presidential candidates and other elected officials. Much of the Progressive Era reforms had been aimed at expanding voter participation, from the voting reforms formulated by Wisconsin governor and Senator Robert LaFollette (initiative, recall, and referendum) to the direct election of senators and the passage of female suffrage.

Presidential candidates still struggled with this balance. As per tradition, the candidates did not participate in the nominating process at the conventions, with the pretense of being drafted by the party loyalists reigning supreme. As the Democrats arrived in New York City, both William Gibbs McAdoo and Al Smith devised plans to be present and active throughout the duration of the convention proceedings, and in particular, the nominating process, all while not appearing on the convention floor. McAdoo, traveled across the country from California and set up headquarters at the Vanderbilt Hotel. He set up media liaisons to broker breaking campaign news and pronouncements, and all of the hotels around Madison Square Garden were deployed to serve as headquarters for the various competing factions. To set the tone for the proceedings, McAdoo immediately made his feelings known, denouncing the convention location as “the sinister, unscrupulous, invisible government which has as its seat in the citadel of privilege and finance in New York City” (conveniently ignoring the fact that he had also spent a large part of his adult life in the same place). 236

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Tenuous Alliance: Franklin Roosevelt and Al Smith.

Al Smith employed a different strategy entirely. In late 1923, Smith’s campaign began making overtures to Franklin Roosevelt to serve as a campaign surrogate at the convention. It was a fateful decision: Franklin Roosevelt would use the convention as his re-entry into the political world and began to claim the party’s leadership. In the aftermath of the convention, while Smith nursed his defeat, Roosevelt quietly began planning his Circular Letter, an unprecedented claim of leadership. Their strained personal relationship provides insight into why Roosevelt acted so quickly to claim party leadership, and why the party he envisioned was less reliant on figures like Smith for electoral success.

Al Smith and Franklin Roosevelt eyed each other warily their entire lives, their political fortunes rising at the same time. They served together in the New York General Assembly for Roosevelt’s one term before joining the Navy Department. Smith’s rise to the statehouse in 1918 came while Roosevelt was bored and stewing in the Navy Department, after his New York Senate bid in 1914 ended in disaster. At the 1920 convention in San Francisco, Roosevelt delivered the nominating speech for Smith, out of a sense of duty for a fellow New Yorker. He also made a dramatic spectacle during a planned tribute to President Wilson and was named the surprise nominee for vice president. When the Cox-Roosevelt ticket was soundly defeated, no one assigned blame to Roosevelt. When Smith’s re-election as governor of New York failed, however, he was left in political shambles.237

Smith’s 1922 bid to reclaim the governorship relied on support from New York Democrats who viewed his 1920 defeat as an aberration. He reached out to Franklin Roosevelt to help serve as support for his new campaign, but Franklin was fighting for his life after his polio

237 Murray, 103rd Ballot, 68.
attack. This was the first public indication that Roosevelt’s illness was as disastrous as it was rumored. Roosevelt and Smith participated, willingly, in the tired charade of Smith being drafted by his party. This was made urgent by the looming threat that, if Smith did not run, newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst would. The Smith camp asked for Roosevelt to write a letter, urging Smith to run, and Roosevelt, mindful of his future, complied. The letter, of course, was leaked to the press: “I have been in touch with men and women voters from almost every upstate county and there is no question that the rank and file of Democrats want you to run…We realize that years of public service make it most desirable that you think now for a while of your family’s needs—I am in the same boat myself—yet this call to further service must come first.” Eleanor took a leading role in Smith campaign and toured upstate New York, giving speeches, while Franklin convalesced and soaked up the attention his endorsement provided. Smith won the governorship back, and turned his attention to the 1924 presidential election.238

Smith’s friends and supporters were well aware of his political liabilities, and overtures quickly began to pour into the Roosevelt residence for Franklin to serve in an expanded role in Smith’s presidential campaign. Franklin Roosevelt was one of the best-known Democrats, with his famous last name and his recent bid as vice president. His political stature was undimmed by his recent polio attack, even as it left questions about his future ambition. Roosevelt was one of the few transcendent political figures, with his wealth and status in upstate New York making him respected by Republicans and revered by Democratic leaders for his influence. Compared to Smith, the contrast between the two New York Democrats was stark: Smith was Catholic, an avowed wet, a product of the Tammany Hall machine, and the quintessential rags-to-riches

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Bowery boy, while Roosevelt was Protestant, publicly dry (if personally wet), anti-Tammany, and born into wealth and privilege. In this, Roosevelt’s patrician upbringing afforded him the opportunity to experiment with political positions. He was not dependent on income from any of the positions to which he was elected or appointed to, and consistency in positions was not something he was either interested in or troubled by. Al Smith’s entire livelihood was dependent on his political career, and his label as a burgeoning politician never left.239

The difference between the two men was made permanent at Madison Square Garden when Al Smith needed, desperately, the public blessing and endorsement of Franklin Roosevelt to mollify the Southern and Western wings of the Democratic Party at the nominating convention. Later, the exact timeline became a source of dispute between Smith and Roosevelt, especially as their relationship deteriorated publicly. Smith always claimed that Franklin “begged” him for the opportunity to head his campaign as chairman and speak at the convention, desperate to reclaim his position as a party leader and national figure after his debilitating polio attack.240

Franklin’s camp told a different story, with Smith’s handlers acutely aware that Smith stood no chance of being nominated with all the attendant attention paid to the prohibition enforcement issue and the Klan platform debate without the public support of one of the party’s accepted voices. Smith’s close friend and advisor, Joseph Proskauer, verified this version, including Roosevelt begging off and requiring Al Smith to make a personal visit to Roosevelt’s 65th Street residence to ask him to take the job. When Smith balked at using Roosevelt to nominate him (likely aware of all the spectacle that the speech would cause), Proskauer told him, “Because you’re a Bowery mick and he’s a Protestant patrician and he’d take some of the curse

239 Craig, After Wilson, 54-55; and Gallagher, FDR’s Splendid Deception, 59.
240 Tobin, The Man He Became, 186.
In truth, both men needed the other in this situation: Franklin needed Smith’s campaign and nominating speech to provide his dramatic re-entry into the national political conversation, while Smith needed Roosevelt’s endorsement to placate and make inroads with the party’s intolerant and suspicious base.

Franklin Roosevelt agreed to serve as campaign chairman, with Joseph Proskauer and Belle Moskovitz (Al Smith’s secretary) assuring him that the title was largely ceremonial and that he could serve merely as a figurehead: he was expected to give the nominating speech and allow his name to be used on Smith campaign materials, but little more was expected of him; Smith had staffers who would do the day-to-day correspondence and press demands. Franklin ignored them, and insisted on setting up his own operations out of his home, sending out press releases, and issuing hand-signed correspondence for visiting delegates himself. The letters were variations on a form letter that he hoped would disabuse Democrats of the various rumors that they had heard regarding Al Smith’s private life and public views, while simultaneously re-introducing himself politically. An example of his features was a list he curated and sent out to delegates prior to their arrival, listing ten reasons to nominate Al Smith over McAdoo. Among the reasons were the Democratic Party’s reliance on states with large population and Smith’s popularity in New York, Smith’s alleged popularity among independents, labor leaders, and businessmen, and Smith’s rags-to-riches biography and vibrant personality. Roosevelt addressed

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the elephant in the room with “fearless enforcement of the law,” a line he hoped would placate fears about Smith’s view on Prohibition.\footnote{244 “Roosevelt Busy at Convention,” \textit{Oakland (CA) Tribune}, June 25, 1924, 1; “Gives Ten Reasons for Naming Smith,” \textit{The New York Times}, June 6, 1924, 1; and “Smith and Roosevelt Talk Over Campaign with Delegates,” \textit{Bradford (PA) Era}, June 24, 1924, 1.}

Eleanor Roosevelt was equally caught up in the whirlwind that accompanied the Democratic Convention, and continued to evolve as a political figure in her own right. She served as head of the Democratic Women’s Caucus, and planned events to welcome the first female delegates to New York City (several teas were planned at the Roosevelt’s private Upper East Side residence), but she was also busy issuing statements to the press. She worked hard to dispel the idea that women could be considered single-issue voters, and encouraged dissemination of platform information among the female delegates so they could prove their wide interests. One article, titled “Women Satisfied to Let Men Lead,” said succinctly: “Women are more interested in platforms; men are more interested in candidates.” Eleanor’s planning with the Democratic Women’s Caucus had the combined effect of creating her own space in the Democratic Party, serving the party itself, and helping her husband dominate the Manhattan press corps. The Roosevelts were the Democrats to talk to in New York City.\footnote{245 “Women Delegates to Discuss Planks,” \textit{The New York Times}, June 8, 1924, 1; “Women’s Clubs Active,” \textit{The New York Times}, June 23, 1924, 8; “Women Satisfied to Let Men Lead,” \textit{The New York Times}, June 23, 1924, 4; and “Gloom Sees Smith Victim of Kindness,” \textit{The New York Times}, June 26, 1924, 5.}

As Democrats assembled in New York City, Roosevelt remained at Smith headquarters at the Waldorf, though he accidentally created problems for the presidential candidate. Smith’s official position on prohibition enforcement was complicated by his record as governor, where the Mullan-Gage Act absolved New York State of enforcing prohibition (national law enforcement would take up the slack). To those already mistrustful of Al Smith, this seemed like a dangerous precedent, and Roosevelt trumpeting Smith’s record shone a spotlight on this
measure. Smith hoped to pacify his opponents and ardent prohibition supporters by stating that his official position was one of strict enforcement, but his opponents were dubious. Franklin learned to become very cautious in his role with the press and began devoting increased attention to preparing his nominating speech.  

The Shadow of the Burning Cross: The Klan at Madison Square Garden.

The convention drama was not limited to choosing the nominee. The Democratic Party platforms were usually drama-free, with the delegates quickly affirming the milquetoast positions decided by the Platform Committee in advance of the floor vote. In 1920, there were rumors of a platform debate over a proposed plank that would advocate a wet position on prohibition enforcement. William Jennings Bryan and his followers quickly moved to cut off any debate, and the motion passed. There would be no such maneuvering in New York City, especially over the divisive issue of the Ku Klux Klan within the Democratic Party and the party nearly imploded over the debate on the convention floor. The Klan was the problem that most Circular Letter respondents highlighted and the convention debate scarred Democrats for years, and Franklin Roosevelt learned the limits of allowing debates to overtake party unity on the convention floor.

Senator Oscar Underwood from Alabama was responsible for the Klan’s appearance at the 1924 Democratic Convention. As the Klan gained power throughout the South, it targeted and recruited high-profile Congressmen and governors into its ranks. Underwood remained one of the few holdouts, and thus a target of the Klan’s ire, labeling him the “Jew, jug, and Jesuit” candidate. Underwood was used to being a maverick among his fellow Southern Congressmen: he had been one of the lone holdouts opposed to prohibition, viewing the legislation as overreach.

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of the government’s control. Yet, even he was unprepared for the backlash that his criticism of
the Klan brought, including a large rally in Birmingham, aimed squarely at sending a message to
Underwood’s electoral prospects in the future. He entered the Democratic primary in Georgia in
early 1924, alongside McAdoo (but not Smith), and was soundly defeated.247

Underwood decided that the shadow forces of the Klan’s power needed to be revealed,
and the veiled threats of the Klan neutralized once and for all on the floor of the national
convention. He urged, in the name of the Democratic Party’s future and party unity, a platform
plank that would serve as a referendum at the convention for the party to debate the Klan’s
influence throughout the South. The issue became more urgent as the convention approached.
First, the national Klan announced the formal endorsement of William Gibbs McAdoo for
president. McAdoo faced a quandary: accept the endorsement and support of a growing force,
but risk alienating the progressives and northeastern faction of the party; or reject the
endorsement and risk the ire of the volatile Klan leadership. He hoped Klan support would go
unnoticed if it appeared unsolicited, but Underwood’s and Smith’s campaigns made sure to
remind the press and voters of the endorsement at every turn as delegates gathered in New York
City. In a carefully-worded statement, delivered in Georgia, McAdoo spoke out on the Klan
issue: “I stand four-square with respect to this and I stand four-square with respect to every other
organization on the immutable question of liberty contained in the first amendment of the
Constitution....namely [in favor of] freedom of religious worship, freedom of speech, freedom of
the press, and the right of peaceful assembly.” Klan leaders read this as tacit support, while
McAdoo’s supporters tried to spin it as a commitment to protecting the Constitution over
factionalism.248

247 Craig, After Wilson, 53-54; and Murray, 103rd Ballot, 51-54.
248 “Both Sides Watch Third Party Issue,” The New York Times, June 2, 1924, 1; Arthur M. Schlesinger,
The Democratic Party’s Klan debate came at a time when they could have capitalized on Republican’s indifference to the danger the Klan posed. The Republican Convention took place in Cleveland mere weeks before the Democrats met in New York, and was as efficient as expected, with Coolidge’s nomination unopposed and the milquetoast platform passed easily. The only major drama was in choosing a vice presidential candidate, but even that process was bloodless. In the aftermath, African Americans expressed their disappointment that the Republican Party refused to address or even acknowledge the dangerous Klan activity (while Senator Underwood was making it clear he anticipated a full-throated debate at the Democratic Convention). During World War I, many African Americans had moved north to seek better jobs, particularly in the Midwest. States like Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri offered more job opportunities, particularly in automobile-related industries, and the cities flourished with new economic opportunities as their size grew. They also became contentious battlegrounds when the call for “normalcy” at war’s end was sounded. The Klan, while notoriously violent and aggressive throughout the South, was also finding new and virulent support throughout the Midwest, especially in rural areas. To African Americans, the specter of white-hooded racists, bent on making their lives difficult and their voting rights insecure, had followed them north. The Republican Party carefully avoided any controversy and did not denounce Klan activity. African Americans accused it of cowardice, and reluctance to criticize known Klan activity among Northern Republicans. This pointed inaction put the Republican Party’s traditional support among African Americans at risk, with eyes on what the Democrats would do when given the opportunity. While the Klan and Democratic Party often worked in concert in the South, Northern Democrats were outspoken in their denunciation of it. Whether

the anti-Klan wing could wrest control of the party away from the notorious organization was about to be answered.249

The timing of the platform vote contributed to the event being a main attraction and political gauntlet. The official schedule made the second day a featured opportunity for placing candidates into nomination and for the platform debates and votes. The nominating process had become a raucous affair: in addition to the anticipated candidates, most states took the opportunity to propose “favorite son” nominees for president, with nominating and seconding speeches and cheers accompanying the proposals. In the case of the major candidates, there were planned demonstrations, with songs and marching around the arena. These demonstrations contained a great deal of suspense about their duration, the participation of individual states’ delegations, and whether the states’ “standards” (the banners denoting state constituency on the convention floor) could be used.

The two main factions set the stage for a battle. Those opposed to McAdoo or the Klan (or both) made it clear that they intended to denounce the Klan by name on the convention floor, in full view of the gallery. This forced McAdoo’s contingent to a tumultuous decision: follow suit and risk alienating their base of support in the South, or severely limit McAdoo’s chance with the rest of the electorate. In the days leading up to the convention, McAdoo’s handlers tried to convince Underwood and his surrogates to minimize their denunciation, to consider opaque wording or even avoidance. Underwood only became more resolute, and the Smith supporters encouraged the tension. Underwood issued an editorial to The New York Times to discuss his planned denunciation of the Ku Klux Klan. He cited the growing control of the Klan in all

regions of the country (to dispel the notion that this was an uniquely Southern predicament) and referenced Thomas Jefferson’s insistence on religious tolerance: “When the Democratic Party meets, will it follow in the footsteps of Jefferson or obey the ‘Dragons’ and the ‘Cyclops’ of a secret society, whose characters are unknown to the public?” He concluded with his view of what was at stake: the Democratic Party had the responsibility to denounce “a political crusade in the twentieth century, and in the United States of America, against Catholic and foreign born, (that) is neither justified by the past history nor the future prospects of the country, nor in unison with the spirit of toleration and enlarged freedom which peculiarly distinguishes the American system of popular government.”  

Franklin Roosevelt took on a larger role as campaign manager and media handler, speaking for the Smith campaign when declaring that it was resistant to any compromise that would let the Klan or McAdoo off the hook: “There are five million Democratic voters in Northern and Western states who will vote against any candidate of the Democratic Party whose nomination is dictated by the Ku Klux Klan...The principles of the Ku Klux Klan are incompatible with the principles of American liberty, and no candidate who invites their support is entitled to the endorsement of the Democratic Convention.” This moment revealed the political ruthlessness Roosevelt would display later in his career, delivering the killing blow when he smelled blood. While a vote about the Klan was urgent for many in the Democratic Party, it was apparent that it was also politically advantageous to Al Smith and Oscar Underwood to pursue the strong denunciation, and disastrous for William Gibbs McAdoo. On

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251 “Smith Relies on This Record,” The New York Times, June 23, 1924, 1.
the eve of the nomination, a rumor spread that 590 delegates prepared to denounce the Klan, called a “pregnant menace to American institutions.”

The Klan, for its part, mobilized in Madison Square Garden to force the Democratic Party’s hand and to destroy Al Smith’s chances of being nominated for president. On the eve of the convention opening, Klan leaders played cagy with the press, telling the *New York Times* that the Klan controlled the delegations of Georgia, Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi, and Kansas, and had a majority in Ohio, Missouri, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Tennessee, and West Virginia. Klan leaders also claimed that there were over a thousand Klan members planning on attending (in the galleries or convention floor). They refused to divulge names, but definitely wanted to demonstrate their strength and dispel the notion that they were confined to a single region.

The Klan distributed thousands of copies of the *Fellowship Forum* throughout New York City, specifically ridiculing Smith’s Catholicism. McAdoo played equally cagy, dodging the press’ attempts to get him to definitively state his support for or denunciation of the Klan. “My views are well known and quite definite, and surely you do not expect me to state them again…the candidate will have to run on the platform. The delegates decide these matters.” He was adamant that the party should determine the platform and not the candidate, a truly democratic (if also evasive) approach.

William Jennings Bryan, failed three-time nominee, was in town to serve as a delegate from Florida, his new home. He continued to view himself as one of the party leaders, even if his

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253 Among the rumors was a story that William Jennings Bryan was actually a Klan plant while serving as a member of the Florida delegation; Murray, *103rd Ballot*, 108.

attempt at playing kingmaker in 1920 (when he tried to block James Cox’s nomination) failed. Here, again, he tried to play the role of peacemaker between the McAdoo and Smith camps, though Smith’s supporters viewed him with suspicion and derision. Bryan’s personal crusade against any lax enforcement of the Prohibition laws found an unlikely and unsolicited ally in the Klan. He was all too happy to throw water on Al Smith’s chances and reignite his old recriminations, telling The New York Times, “He hasn’t got a chance. You people here in New York may want him but you New Yorkers are always forgetting that there is quite a bit of country outside of this state. The Middle West and West don’t know him and don’t want him. The South won’t have him at all.”  

As the convention convened, the McAdoo forces attempted and failed to secure an amendment to the Rules Committee that would have required the two-third rule be placed on the platform planks (making it far more likely that the Klan plank would have been rejected); a simple majority vote, almost assured by the anti-McAdoo forces, would prevail. Ironically, pro-McAdoo forces were also fighting the two-third rule for the presidential nomination, with fears that it was undemocratic to not allow a simple majority vote. Another rejected proposal from McAdoo’s camp would have allowed for the presidential nominating vote before the platform votes. Like the rejected two-third vote, this proposal failed, much to the McAdoo campaign’s consternation. The convoluted convention schedule proceeded with the nominating speeches, then the platform planks, and then the voting for president and vice president. The circus continued as scheduled.  

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On the Convention Floor

One of the major complaints in the Circular Letter was just how violent and uncivilized the convention proceedings became, and that it all happened in full view of independent voters via the radio and newspaper journalists. In a stunning lack of party leadership, no one stepped in to bring order to the proceedings and remind attendees of their shared values or history, and most Democrats left the convention hurt and disillusioned with their party’s ugliness. Franklin Roosevelt did all this, but he did it months after the event, and in doing so, he was concerned more with charting a new future for both the party and his political career.

Cordell Hull called the convention to order amid revelry just after noon on Tuesday, July 24th, 1924. The delegates assembled with their states for a roll call and for the opening proceedings. For the first time in history, female delegates representing each state were welcomed on the convention floor, where the press noted that they were far more attentive to the proceedings than their male counterparts. Adding to the excitement was the fact that, again for the first time, the entire proceedings were transmitted nationwide to radio audiences. Senator Pat Harrison from Mississippi delivered the keynote address and served as moderator for the convention. He included a salute to the late President Woodrow Wilson, which led to a prolonged demonstration including contingents from each state. Harrison’s speech was noted for its harsh criticism and treatment of the Harding and Coolidge Administrations, and at any other convention, would have set the tone in providing a contrast between what the Democrats offered and what the Republicans were providing. The tensions were already exploding here, however, and Harrison’s speech was largely filler before the showdown over the Klan and nominees. The rest of the opening proceedings were largely perfunctory, and received by a largely subdued
crowd and disappointed media, hoping for the promised clash between Klan and anti-Klan forces to take place.  

The excitement was palpable on the second day, Wednesday, July 25th, as the convention program turned to nominating speeches, with temperatures in the convention hall reaching over 100 degrees. Forney Johnston, a young delegate from Alabama, ended the wait for the clash over the Klan when he placed Underwood’s name in nomination. The crowd was primed for explosion and interrupted Johnston’s academic speech several times, especially when he made reference to the Democratic Party’s 1856 plank condemning the Know-Nothing Party. To drive the point home, Forney declared that the party needed to reaffirm the position against “any policy proscribing from public office members of certain races and creeds...as is now proscribed by the Ku Klux Klan.” There was complete bedlam in the aftermath, as anti-Klan (pro-Smith/pro-Underwood/anti-McAdoo) delegates marched around the convention floor for over a half hour in support. The media watched the inter-state fights, as delegates within contingents fought for the individual states’ standards, with members from Colorado accidentally breaking their standard completely. The crowds in the galleries were full participants, either cheering or jeering the marched demonstration, depending on their affiliation.

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The day was not over. Soon after the anti-Klan demonstration, James Phelan took the stage for California’s delegation to place William McAdoo into nomination. The crowd grew restless as Phelan recited McAdoo’s resume (leaving the impression that McAdoo had a far larger role that he actually did during World War I), prompting the galleries to cut off his speech with the demand “Name your man!” to avoid further droning. When he finally delivered the name, the crowd erupted for a second, much more organized demonstration, replete with dance routines, trumpets, and songs. The demonstration lasted for over an hour, and closed out the day’s session. Most of the delegates who earlier sat out the anti-Klan demonstration now were given an opportunity to parade around the convention floor. The galleries had a supporting role, once again. McAdoo’s supporters chanted “Mac, Mac, McAdoo!” or “We don’t care what Easterners do, the West and South for McAdoo!” McAdoo’s opponents, however, derisively chanted back “Ku, Ku, McAdoo!” After the celebration, the convention adjourned for the day, with tension still hanging in the air. 259

Franklin Roosevelt Seizes the Spotlight (and Stays).

While his fellow Democrats parsed their words to either denounce or ignore the Klan issue on the Madison Square Garden floor, Franklin Roosevelt had the additional task of considering how he would even make it to the rostrum. For Roosevelt, the speech nominating Al Smith was a make-or-break moment in his political life. The convention was the first time many in the party had seen Franklin Roosevelt since his attack three years before. As detailed in Chapter II, the extent of Roosevelt’s debilitation was made confusing by the various reports (and

attempts by Louis Howe to temper the language and gravity), making his appearance the source of curiosity and concern. In the days leading up to his speech, Franklin took great pains to ensure that the convention would catapult him back into the political sphere for good. His Circular Letter was a natural extension of his success at the convention, as he capitalized on his popular speech and the party’s implosion to save his party, and his political career.

Franklin’s approach to the convention was novel for someone in a position of ceremonial importance. Previous campaign managers of his stature allowed their name to be used in press releases, but they were rarely the floor managers or press spokesmen for the campaign. Franklin’s insistence on being included in the inner workings of the campaign increased the stakes for him personally. It also exhausted him, as the Smith campaign played host to arriving delegates and the press camped out in the headquarters at the Waldorf for the latest news on the brewing Klan showdown. Franklin’s commitment to his speech became evident the day before the convention opened, as the New York Times reported that he took leave from the campaign headquarters to rehearse it.260

Franklin and Joseph Proskauer feuded over the wording of the speech, with Franklin drafting his own version, Proskauer rejecting it, and then Franklin finding the alternative far too poetic to be effective. Franklin tried to fine-tune it, adding the rhetorical flourishes that served his own future interests as much as Smith’s more immediate ones. In addition to perfecting the language of the speech, Franklin took great pains to ensure that he would be able to physically perform the task without drawing too much attention to his infirmity. He ensured that he was seated near the rostrum when the proceedings began and practiced the number of steps he would

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make in his leaden leg braces over and over again at his Manhattan home. He also ensured that
he had escorts to hasten his walk and to hopefully distract the audience’s attention.261

The proceedings on Thursday, July 26th, opened late, and tension lingered in the air from
the day before. Most attendants came for the speech and demonstration for New York City’s own
hometown boy and governor, and were eager to register their approval or disgust in kind. The
galleries and delegates were aware that Franklin Roosevelt opened the proceedings, heightening
the excitement. Franklin appeared confident, but his outward countenance belied a real anxiety;
immediately before taking the stage, he asked one of the men sitting next to him to shake the
podium, to ensure it could bear his weight as he fought to balance himself during the long
speech.262

He need not have worried, as the speech was a smashing success. The crowd was
appreciably quiet as he quickly swept to the podium, and to most onlookers, once his speech
began, he was as youthful and boisterous as four years previously. He opened with a tacit
acknowledgement of how much his fortune had been altered in the intervening years: “To meet
again so many friends who I have not seen since the last Democratic national gathering gives me
a thrill of pleasure.” After much pre-speech debate between Roosevelt, his advisors, and co-
author Proskauer, he inserted the capping line, declaring Al Smith to be “the Happy Warrior,”263
a moniker that followed Smith for the rest of his life. “Four years ago, lying opponents said that

261 Goldberg, The Making of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 71; Brands, Traitor to His Class, 194; Davis, FDR:
Beckoning of Destiny, 755-756; Gallagher, FDR’s Splendid Deception, 61-62; Josephson and Josephson, Al Smith,
312-313; Slayton, Empire Statesman, 209-211; and Tobin, The Man He Became, 190-193. The feuding between
Proskauer and Roosevelt led to split credit between the two, with Franklin never acknowledging that the speech was
largely Proskauer’s verbiage, and Proskauer never fully forgiving him for declining to give credit.
262 Goldberg, The Making of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 71-72; Finan, Alfred E. Smith, 178-179; Houck and
Kiewe, FDR’s Body Politics, 28-29; and Murray, 103rd Ballot, 128-129.
263 Roosevelt first balked at the Wordsworth allusion, “the happy warrior,” telling Proskauer, “I can’t make
that speech. It’s too poetic. You can’t get across Wordsworth’s poem to a gang of degenerates;” Murray, 103rd
Ballot, 129-130.
the country was tired of ideals—they waged a campaign based on an appeal to prejudice, based on the dragging out of boogies and hobgoblins, the subtle encouragement of false fears...Tricked once we have been. Millions of voters are waiting for the opportunity next November to wreak their vengeance on those deceivers. He has a power to strike at error and wrongdo ing that makes his adversaries quail before him. He has a personality that carries to every hearer not only the sincerity but the righteousness of what he says. He is the Happy Warrior of the political battlefield.”

After placing the nomination, Roosevelt watched as the Garden devolved into chaos for over an hour and a half of organized demonstration (the official record listed the speech ending at 12:30, and with the demonstration ending at 2:00 pm, when the chair finally decided to move on with the proceedings), much of the joy for Smith and his supporters, but a good deal reserved for the speaker. Roosevelt basked in the celebration, the moment of triumph for his return to the political arena and the campaign’s only reliable victorious celebration in an uncertain convention. The press weighed in shortly thereafter, and the verdict was unanimous: Franklin Roosevelt’s speech was an enormous success and benefitted Al Smith tremendously. “Even the hostile delegates,” Elmer Davis of The New York Times noted, “seemed impressed by the dramatic quality of Mr. Roosevelt’s appearance and the reception given to him.” Mark Sullivan described it as “the high point of the convention and it belongs with the small list of really great convention speeches.” The New York Herald Tribune noted that the split convention

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264 “Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt, of New York, Presenting Alfred E. Smith, of New York, for Nomination for President,” Official Proceedings of the Democratic Convention, 122-129; Brands, Traitor to His Class, 195; Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox, 93-94; Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 755-756; Finan, Alfred E. Smith, 179-181; Josephson and Josephson, Al Smith, 312-313; Murray, 103rd Ballot, 129-130; and Slayton, Empire Statesman, 209-211.
had only Roosevelt as a reliable and positive figure that the entire convention could unite behind. The *New York Evening World* called him “the real hero of the Democratic Convention.”

While the reviews of Roosevelt’s speech and appearance were uniformly positive, there was a note of condescension and pity in some of the accounts that were disseminated throughout the country. The reaction was a reflection of how little people knew about polio and paralysis in the 1920s, and how little newspapers had published about Roosevelt’s own disability. “He has been ill,” Davis wrote in *The New York Times*, describing Roosevelt’s performance, “...but nothing was the matter with his voice, or with his enthusiasm.” Later, he described Roosevelt as “crippled,” described his gait on crutches, and cited Roosevelt’s posture as “a vigorous and healthful figure, except for his lameness.” Several papers made mention of the great labor that Franklin required to get to the podium. The *Atchison (Kansas) Daily Globe* wrote, “There was a touch of pathos required in the faces of many delegates who had not seen him since the San Francisco convention...There he was among the most active of all the delegates and a vigorous, athletic man in the prime of his life. Today, after suffering from paralysis, he literally had to be lifted up the staircase by two strong men and his face was drawn...”

*The Louisville Courier-Journal* described him as a hero, before continuing to call him “an invalid on crutches, perhaps in pain, who conquered the frailties of body by sheer power of will.” *The Los Angeles Times* reported “He is hopelessly an invalid, his legs paralyzed. Wheel Chair, crutches, and attendants are with him wherever he goes.” In the same *Evening World*

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article citing him as “the real hero,” the article continued to note “Roosevelt might be a pathetic, tragic figure but for the fine courage that flashed in his smile. It holds observers enchained.” 269 Several other papers echoed the sentiment, and few refrained from the ostracizing language that Roosevelt had spent the previous three years hoping to avoid (the McKinney (Texas) Daily Courier-Gazette called him “Crippled Undaunted Franklin Roosevelt” in its headline).270

Regardless of the reception, Franklin returned to his role as campaign manager for the remainder of the convention, and he took his seat on the convention floor and caucusing with the New York delegates to keep Al Smith’s candidacy afloat. He received largely positive reactions from other delegates for the remainder of the convention, and he proved the ideal ambassador for Smith as the proceedings grew tense.

The following day, Friday, June 27th, contained the nominating speeches for an additional nine candidates, bringing the total to sixteen candidates (named by forty-three different speeches). The voting for president would begin as soon as the platform was approved, with the Smith and McAdoo camps optimistically predicting to the press that a nominee would be named by the end of Saturday. As the day wore on and on, and the speeches and demonstrations proved interminable, those predictions fell away. Backdoor negotiations between the two main campaigns (Smith’s and McAdoo’s) over the Klan plank went nowhere, as Smith (with Franklin Roosevelt as spokesman) rebuffed any overtures to tone down the language of the anti-Klan


plank or resist naming the Klan in the denunciation. As delegates departed on Friday, the Klan vote loomed on Saturday and promised to tear the convention apart.271

The Klan Tears the Party in Two.

Franklin Roosevelt’s speech remained the high point of the convention, as the proceedings soon collapsed in a way no one had anticipated. Long-simmering tensions and recriminations over race, religion, class, and region came to full view and the party experienced its lowest moment since the Civil War. At different points in the party’s history, Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts to heal the party could have been revealed as self-serving and opportunistic. But after the proceedings at Madison Square Garden, Roosevelt’s Circular Letter was a welcome effort to give the party some sense of shared values and direction again.

Curiosity-seekers and Democratic partisans once again packed the gallery on Saturday, June 28th, to watch as the Democrats voted to approve the platforms as outlined by the Platform Committee. The group met for the entire week in closed sessions, with select representatives permitted from the Smith and McAdoo factions. While both Smith and McAdoo publicly stated that they were prepared on the platform dictated by the party (McAdoo in particular found this to be a strategic way to avoid stating his opinion either for or against naming the Klan), behind the scenes they both maneuvered to ensure that the platform reflected their own wishes. The task was enormous: the party’s viability on the national stage depended significantly on how the party responded to the major issues.272


Of course, the Klan plank was not the only contentious issue, though the Platform Committee moved far more swiftly on two of the other main topics, Prohibition and the League of Nations. Prohibition divided Democrats before, but William Jennings Bryan showed up to the Committee sessions to insist on reassurances for the “dry” principle, as opposed to simple commitment to enforcement of the law. The party remained consistently and predictably committed to supporting the League of Nations, the recently-deceased Woodrow Wilson’s passion project and the Democratic Party’s albatross in 1920. In previous conventions, the platform committee expected and welcomed debate, with civil disagreement and compromise marking the proceedings.

The committee’s sessions became increasingly contentious as the Klan debate heated up, and it became evident that the party could not afford to back off the issue. Senator David Walsh from Massachusetts argued that Northeastern Democrats were watching the Klan issue with great interest: the Democratic Party’s constituency of new immigrants, and in particular, Catholics and Jews, were interested in how the party dealt with the issue of religious intolerance. Ohio delegate Edmond H. Moore (James Cox’s friend and manager in 1920) cautioned the committee against capitulating on the issue: if the committee refused to name the Klan by name, delegates from the floor would likely force the vote anyway. To take the initiative in committee and perfect the wording, the party could get ahead of a potentially disastrous procedure. Moore composed the plank to read that the party opposed “any effort on the part of the Ku Klux Klan or any organization, to interfere with the religious liberty or political freedom of any citizen.” Together,

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he and Senator Walsh held ground against William Jennings Bryan and others, who favored the condemnation of secret organizations but declined to name the Ku Klux Klan for fear of acrimonious division. The committee’s debates served as a microcosm of the party’s demographic division, with the urban and rural wings hostile to the other’s experiences with religious intolerance and views on the Klan. Bryan, avowed in his faith, turned to a prayer in the last session before the platform vote, but it was clear from the mixed reaction that while he had not drifted from his conception of the Democratic Party, the party had moved on from him.275

The committee met late into the early morning on Saturday, June 28th, before approving a plank that would condemn secret organizations, but not mention the Klan. Quickly, the anti-Klan contingent maneuvered to ensure that, as soon as the plank was read, a delegate would be dispatched to denounce the Klan by name (thereby completely negating the effort the Platform Committee had put in the previous week to avoid such a spectacle).276

In an attempt to subvert a raucous demonstration, the Platform Committee announced that the debate over platform took place after an afternoon recess, meaning that many of the spectators were unable to attend without prepared tickets. When the late afternoon session began, the crowds overran the police and filled the upper galleries to engage the debate anyway. As the reading clerk read through the platform, tension mounted among the delegates and gallery. No one spoke as the Klan plank was read, with sighs of relief when the plank made no mention of the Klan. The crowd dispersed somewhat, believing the fight over, but Maine delegate William Pattangall strode to the stage just as the session was turned over to minority reports and simply

275 “Party Split Widens Over Klan Fight,” Burlington (IA) Hawk Eye, June 28, 1924, 1; “Leaders Seek to Smooth Out Row on KKK Plank,” Joplin (MO) Globe, June 28, 1924, 1; Murray, 103rd Ballot, 145-147; and Slayton, Empire Statesman, 212-213.
read his amendment to the platform: “We condemn political secret societies of all kinds and pledge the Democratic Party to oppose any effort on the part of the Ku Klux Klan...” The galleries and convention floor exploded with cheers and booing, and the chairman gavelled for order to be restored. He announced that the convention would reconvene for debate of the final issues at 8 p.m. that evening, so the Garden was cleared for the second time that day. Both the Smith and McAdoo campaigns were suddenly fearful of the damage a prolonged debated could cause or the negative consequences of either campaign being linked to one side or the other could cause. Smith, buoyed by the telegraphs from supporters and his advisors’ optimism, believed that his opposition to the Klan had more nationwide support among Democrats than was evident on the convention floor. Regardless, the debates were set and the two sides of the issue selected their best speakers to make the case.

Opening the debates, Oklahoma Senator Robert Owen spoke for the majority plank, claiming that there were plenty of Klan members who joined the Klan for high-minded (unnamed) reasons, and did not do so out of hatred or extremism and did not deserve to be condemned by the Democratic Party. William Pattangall addressed the convention, as he did behind the scenes at the Platform Committee meetings, playing to the anti-Klan delegates and galleries by making the issue one of access to rights. He began by reading from one of the Klan’s ads: “Are you a Protestant? Are you white? Are you native born?’ I wonder if its leaders, when questionnaires were being prepared in 1917 to send the youth of America...if when Senator Owen patriotically voted for a draft law as a member of the United States Senate...that we should only draft to defend our country the boys who were white, Protestant, and native born.”

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278 Murray, 103rd Ballot, 153-155.
was another brief demonstration as he ended with the line “I hate bigotry.” The two sides alternated brief speakers, with the biggest surprise coming when Andrew Erwin, mayor of Athens, Georgia, came to the stage. He was the grandson of Howell Cobb, Speaker of the House, James Buchanan’s Secretary of the Treasury, and a proud Confederate officer, and expected to defend the majority plank against naming the Klan. Instead, the pro-Klan contingent erupted with boos and the anti-Klan launched yet another demonstration, complete with the band striking up “Marching Through Georgia,” further inciting the anger of Southern Democrats who opposed the Klan being named, before switching to the neutral “Star-Spangled Banner.”

The final speaker was William Jennings Bryan, and his speech proved a tragic coda to his career at the Democratic conventions. Many expected a repeat of the argument he was delivering to the delegates in private all week: naming the Klan would only gain more publicity for the organization. It was a laughable argument, as the press leading up to the event had not hesitated to name the Klan when describing the quandary that the convention faced. In formally defending the majority plank, he spoke for party unity and avoiding “those three words,” before curiously pausing to emphasize “Ku Klux Klan.” The convention floor broke into bedlam once more, with the raucous anti-Klan forces booing and hissing until his speech ended. Franklin Roosevelt warned the siren operator to cut out the additional noise, which whipped the gallery spectators to even more of a frenzied state. Bryan stopped speaking at one point to address the gallery, telling them (unadvisedly), “You do not represent the future of the party.” The gallery booed and hissed at the end of most sentences until he was finished, and Bryan spent the rest of the session on the

rostrum, unwilling to venture back onto the delegate floor, and held his head in his hands. After his speech, Chairman Walsh called for a recess before the platform vote.280

The state delegations each debated the issue before the roll call. According to press reports, pandemonium reigned as fistfights and shouting matches occurred in several of the state delegations, and some delegations split their vote. When the final vote was tallied, Walsh announced that the convention succeeded in defeating the minority plank (to denounce the Klan by name) by one vote, 541 ½ to 542 ½. The noise after the announcement was deafening, as the anti-Klan delegates and supporters could not believe that the vote had failed and there were calls for each state to register their individual votes and ascertain who had voted for and against the Klan plank. Franklin Roosevelt, who successfully led the New York contingent to vote against the Klan, motioned for the convention to adjourn. It was quickly approved, and the stunned convention dispersed.281

There were no convention sessions on Sunday, June 29th, providing the delegates a much-needed day of rest from the debacle that had dominated the first few days, but the sabbatical proved disastrous for two reasons. First, the convention had already lasted longer than the Republicans’ and they still had not voted on presidential and vice presidential candidates. Delegates now had a full day to debate whether they could commit to the entire proceedings with tensions fraught and tempers flared. Second, the newspapers had a full day to editorialize what had transpired the night before. Luckily for many Democrats, particularly in swing states in the

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Northeast, a violent storm had knocked out radio transmissions of the convention’s disastrous Klan debate and vote, but the newspapers printed the proceedings all the same. For urban delegates, or those with constituencies dominated by Catholics, Jews, or African-Americans, there was simply no way to elide the disastrous Klan vote with the image of inclusivity the Democratic Party so desperately needed to compete with the Republican bloc. Northeastern and metropolitan Midwestern newspapers uniformly condemned the Democratic Party for perceived cowardice, while newspapers in Klan controlled regions, especially in the South, expressed puzzlement that the party was tearing itself apart over the inclusion of the Klan’s name.282

Choosing the Nominee

To add insult to serious injury, after the Klan debacle, the party still needed to choose a nominee, and both of the front-runners came with baggage. In the prolonged balloting, nearly everyone was dissatisfied with the result, and John W. Davis had little support to launch an effective general election campaign. For Democrats, the election was a missed opportunity and the nominating process and the party’s inability to unite regional factions was a major reason why the party continued to lag behind Republicans.

While the Democratic Party reeled from the disastrous session, the reality was that the party still had the difficult task of selecting a nominee for November’s election. The New York Times reported several delegates using the rest day to sight-see in the city or nearby Coney Island, but party officials and the campaigns spent the day performing damage control and trying to assess how to move forward.

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For the party, there were really no other options but to try to launch into the nominating ballots as efficiently as possible, and prohibiting any further long and blustery speeches would minimize the damage. McAdoo’s campaign was rattled by the performance of the anti-Klan contingent, and the amount of enmity from the gallery and delegates was a blow to the perceived front-runner. Smith’s crowd was similarly unsettled: internally, they believed that the Klan vote and ensuing criticism meant that the party was all but required to nominate Smith, so as to appear unbigoted and reconciliatory, but there were many skeptics. For both candidates, the fact that the vote was split almost precisely down the middle meant that their support might never reach the required two-third mark for nomination, particularly not when emotions ran so high and the opposition seemed so extreme.283

Delegates and gallery attendants had an opportunity to get well-acquainted with the procedure of the roll call vote beginning with the Monday (June 30th) session. The clerk read each state, alphabetically, and the state’s delegate spokesperson responded (with some flourish, of course) as to how the votes were divided and directed. At the end of the roll call, the clerk announced the running tally, some announcements were made (resolutions for points of order, recognition, etc.), a delegate would ask for a quick recess, and then the process commenced again. The behind-the-scenes wrangling of the different campaigns ensured that there were relatively few surprises in the first rounds of balloting, as the individual states were apportioned accordingly. Complicating matters, however, was that while most states were bound to the “unit rule” (meaning their entire delegation needed to have a consensus and that their entire slate of votes were awarded to a single candidate), there were some states that could split their vote.

283 Murray, 103rd Ballot, 164-166.
Occasionally, states were called to have their delegates vote individually, to ascertain how the votes were allocated. 284

At the end of the first ballot, it was clear how the support was divided. Nineteen different candidates received votes, with some of them receiving “favorite son” votes from their home states. As expected, Al Smith’s support primarily came from the Northeast (he did not receive a vote from a Southern state all convention), while William McAdoo received votes from 34 of the 54 state and territory delegations, mainly throughout the South and some from the West. McAdoo led the first several rounds of balloting with a dominant advantage, 431 ½ to 241 for Smith (James Cox, the 1920 nominee, was third with just 59 votes). While clearly leading, it was also evident that McAdoo was well shy of the required two-third threshold of 729 votes for nomination.285

There were fifteen ballots cast on the first day (Monday, June 30th) and fifteen on the second (Tuesday, July 1st). For both Smith and McAdoo’s camps, the process was a combination of steady resolve and behind-the-scenes maneuvering. While the two-third requirement made the nomination difficult for both, their ability to control their factions also meant blocking their opponent. While eliminating the also-rans might clear up votes, both men encouraged their campaigns to “stand pat,” to avoid a stampede of delegates to the opposition. At the end of the first day of balloting, for instance, the Kansas delegation switched votes from their favorite-son, Governor Jonathan Davis, to McAdoo. Sensing the potential for a momentum shift, McAdoo’s

284 “Balloting Upon the Selection of the Nominee for President,” Official Proceedings of the Democratic Convention, 337-348; and Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 121-122.
supporters staged yet another demonstration, but the subsequent ballot suggested that the groundswell had its limitations.\textsuperscript{286}

The anger and hurt feelings between the two candidates prevented any compromise to take place. As the second day drew to a close, the convention was no nearer a consensus candidate than when voting began. This was not necessarily a problem, as many conventions, from both parties, had taken multiple ballots and were deadlocked before backroom wrangling (like the quintessential “smoke-filled room” that nominated Warren Harding at the Republican convention four years before). The Democrats tried to make the convention process as democratic as possible, with radio broadcasting the entire proceedings, access to the nationwide press, and open viewing galleries: to engage now in duplicitous measures would undo the progress and access the party had publicized.\textsuperscript{287}

At the beginning of the Wednesday, July 2\textsuperscript{nd} session, William Jennings Bryan, serving as Florida delegate and fancying himself the only principled mediator, asked for an opportunity to address the convention again, in the hopes of “harmony.” Bryan also hoped to redeem himself after his terrible performance Saturday night, but this speech was met with hostility from the outset. Bryan’s opposition to naming the Klan convinced most that he was in the pocket of McAdoo, and when he uttered his name, midway through, the boos and shouts caused him to pause his speech. He angrily responded to a heckler accusing McAdoo of oil connections (due to his ties to the notorious Teapot Dome scandal), but Bryan became unfocused and rambling.


Catcalls urged him to quit speaking, and finally, he relented. Bryan withdrew from the platform and rejoined his fellow Florida delegates, but the damage to his brand was compounded.  

McAdoo’s campaign alerted the press that Wednesday evening’s session was the “do-or-die” moment, that after Bryan’s speech, a stampede of delegates would carry him to victory. Smith’s campaigns encouraged the lesser-supported nominees to stay in to prevent a complete avalanche of support, but Franklin Roosevelt and the New York delegation appeared nervous as several states switched support to McAdoo. The Californian’s support peaked at just over five hundred delegates, but it stopped there on subsequent ballots. McAdoo’s supporters asked for an adjournment for fear that the failure of the stampede to materialize would cause his supporters to look elsewhere. It was clear to McAdoo and his campaign on that night that he would not be the nominee, but his hatred of Al Smith and hurt feelings over what he perceived as undermining stunts and unfair criticism meant that he would stay in until he could ensure that Smith would not be the nominee, either.

The Thursday and Friday sessions (July 3rd and 4th) similarly showed no signs of easing for either front-runner, leading Will Rogers to write to the delegates “New York invited you here as guests, not to live.” McAdoo’s campaign started a fund for rural delegates, believing there was a Smith conspiracy to prolong the convention and deplete the rural delegates from far-flung parts of the South. Al Smith received telegrams from minorities, Jews, and Catholics, begging

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him not to give in to McAdoo and continue his stance against nativism and bigotry. The balloting tally repeated several times with no advantage, even after Indiana and Ohio’s favorite sons, Samuel Ralston (a Klan favorite for his attacks on Catholic schools in Indiana, and an ally of McAdoo) and James Cox withdrew. Franklin Roosevelt made a motion on Friday to allow Al Smith to address the convention (a presidential candidate had never addressed the convention floor before). Another delegate made a similar motion, to allow the candidates to address the delegates in closed session. Both motions had majority consent, but not the required two-third vote, and Smith supporters grew angry at the rebuff of their candidate. By now, heated discussions were underway from both camps, urging the other to quit, with Franklin Roosevelt bringing his missive to the convention floor.291

The vote to reject Smith’s speech occurred on the Fourth of July, the eleventh day of the convention. At the same time, the Ku Klux Klan held a massive rally in Long Beach, New Jersey, featuring 20,000 Klan members, a mass baptism, weddings, and the burning and beating of an effigy—of Al Smith, complete with a whiskey bottle under his arm. Judge C. J. Orbison from Indianapolis was one of the featured speakers, telling the masses: “I have just come from Jew York and have been to the Democratic Kloonvention. No matter what they do there will not be anybody but a Protestant as President or Vice President. If the Democrats are foolish enough to nominate Al Smith, they won’t carry six states...In Indiana, we are going to elect a Klansman for Governor, the Republican candidate.” Privately, Al Smith was shaken by the demonstration and shocked the Klan had remained such a divisive issue this late into the convention.292


292 “Klan Rally Vents Anti-Smith Feeling,” The New York Times, July 5, 1924, 6; “Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 121-123; Leuchtenberg, The Perils of Prosperity, 133; Murray, 103rd Ballot, 184-187; and Slayton,
There were similar overtures on Saturday, July 5th, to end the impasse between the two candidates, with suggestions of moving the convention elsewhere, having the candidates with the second-most votes receive the vice presidential bid, to force all states to release the votes of their favorite-sons, and to formally end the two-third rule. Similarly, Texas Governor Thomas Ball made a motion to have a run-off featured: at the end of each successive ballot, the candidate with the fewest votes would be eliminated until there were two candidates. McAdoo’s campaign rejected this motion for fear that breaking the two-third rule would weaken their support, even while the motion was perceived as a pro-McAdoo measure (removing Smith’s allies). The convention broke for a “harmony conference,” held in a private room at the Waldorf between forty delegates representing the remaining candidates (including Franklin Roosevelt, as Smith’s main representative). The meeting was largely a waste of time as neither McAdoo nor Smith’s camp was interested in reaching an agreement with the other side.293

The sessions on Monday, July 7th, were unremarkable, except for the noticeable trend that, after the “harmony conference,” McAdoo’s support started to ebb. The evening session was cut short with the announcement from Washington that Calvin Coolidge’s son had passed away from blood poisoning, and the convention adjourned out of respect. On Tuesday, July 8th, delegates switched tactics to begin locating a suitable compromise candidate. Attempts to nominate convention chairman Thomas Walsh or to re-enter Samuel Ralston’s name were rejected by the individuals; similarly, a half-hearted attempt to generate interest in a fourth nomination for William Jennings Bryan was still-born. After several ballots without change,

friends of Smith and McAdoo forced the two men to meet at the Ritz-Carlton. The two men talked for over an hour, each cognizant of the impossibility of winning the nomination but also feeling pressured by their supporters to not give in to the other. They discussed a joint withdrawal, but they each rejected the other’s suggested replacement candidates. They left the meeting agreeing to consider withdrawing, and agreeing to meet later if such an agreement could be rendered. When the convention reconvened that evening, Franklin Roosevelt started off the session by reading a statement that offered, “Immediately upon the withdrawal by Mr. McAdoo, Governor Smith will withdraw his name also...”

The totals of both men had receded to 353 a piece by the ninety-ninth ballot in the early morning hours of Wednesday, July 9th. Suddenly, at two in the morning, Chairman Walsh announced that he had received a telegram from William McAdoo, reasserting his agony over jilting his supporters, but believing that the party’s deadlock was dangerous and needed to be alleviated. McAdoo did not offer the unconditional withdrawal sought by Smith earlier in the day, but released his delegates to “take such action as, in their judgment, may best serve the interests of the party.” Smith was surrounded by reporters at the Manhattan Club when the telegram was delivered; McAdoo never responded directly to Smith regarding his withdrawal, and his refusal to meet with Smith again served as a demonstration of his pride. Chairman Walsh allowed for one subsequent ballot, to ascertain where the McAdoo votes would go, but the totals of the major contenders remained the same, the new delegates splitting their votes among the remaining candidates. As the balloting neared its conclusion, William Jennings Bryan strode to the stage to speak once more. The galleries erupted with catcalls “Throw him out!” and booing,

294 “Democrats Smoke Peace Pipe in Vain,” Amarillo (TX) Globe, July 6, 1924,1; “President’s Son, Calvin Jr, Dies as Parents Watch,” The New York Times, July 8, 1924, 1; Murray, 103rd Ballot, 196-198; and Brands, Traitor to His Class, 196.
refusing to abate even as he raised his hands before speaking. He withdrew from the stage and the convention adjourned at four in the morning.295

When the convention reconvened in the morning, James Cox talked among the Ohio delegates to switch their support to John W. Davis. *The New York Times* had a small blurb about Davis in their preview article, but Davis was not considered a major threat for the nomination, and in fact, was not too familiar to many in the party. He had served one term in Congress, representing West Virginia, before serving as Solicitor General and then Ambassador to the Court of St. James under Woodrow Wilson. Following his term in London, Davis returned to law practice in New York City, mainly representing J.P. Morgan. McAdoo had rejected Davis as a compromise candidate when Smith first suggested him in their private conference, claiming he was too tied to Wall Street and was notably anti-Klan despite his Southern roots. In addition, as Solicitor General, Davis had defended black voting rights, highlighted by attacking the Oklahoma “grandfather clause,” which suppressed black voting, and eliminating the Alabama convict leasing system. William Jennings Bryan had stated that there was no difference between Calvin Coolidge and Davis. McAdoo’s distaste for Davis was clear, but he was also fearful that Smith would turn to the one man he despised more than Smith himself: Oscar Underwood. Faced with those options, McAdoo could live with Davis far more than Underwood. John Davis was in town for the convention, and his aides prevented him from delivering a statement withdrawing his name. On the seventeenth day, his holdout was proven prophetic. By 3 p.m., the convention was ready to make the decisive ballot, with McAdoo’s support now dispersed and aimed at Davis

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as the compromise. On the 103rd ballot, John Davis received 844 votes, well over what he needed to secure two-third vote, and he was proclaimed the Democratic nominee amidst cheering and demonstrations, of relief if not outright celebration. The new nominee, however, was under no delusion. After receiving word of his nomination, a friend congratulated him on his shocking turn of fortune. Davis smiled and said “Thanks, but we know how much it is worth.”

Aftermath: Putting the Best Face Forward

Few Democrats were optimistic about John W. Davis’ chances of winning the White House, even with all of the Republican scandals. McAdoo and Smith left angry and hurt, William Jennings Bryan left with his reputation in tatters, and John W. Davis tried to sort out an effective way to pull together a campaign quickly. Franklin Roosevelt left New York City with something else in mind: while the convention had been a personal success, he also watched his party tear itself apart. Roosevelt understood that the party needed to take stock of its strengths and weaknesses, and also that the party faithful needed an opportunity to vent about the party’s problems. Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter provided an understanding of how the party’s faithful viewed themselves, and gave Roosevelt unparalleled insight into how his party functioned, and how he could take charge of the party.

Despite the fanfare, there was still more business to take care of. The extremely weary convention delegates reconvened to choose a vice president to pair with Davis. When the session was gaveled to order, a number of the suggested names sent messages asking not to be

considered. Al Smith asked for, and received, permission to finally address the convention floor, now that he was no longer a potential candidate. For Smith, the speech served two functions: first, it helped to ease the embarrassment of the rejection of his offer earlier in the convention proceedings, and second, Smith hoped to demonstrate the contrast of his post-defeat attitude with McAdoo’s hasty escape from Manhattan (he quickly left for Europe on an ocean liner, and bitterly complained in letters to friends about the city bosses thwarting his nomination). Al Smith thought he was being conciliatory, thanking the attending delegates, “I have a heart that is breaking out with gratitude.” Unfortunately, the rest of the speech was not well-received: Smith was aggressive and aired some grievances, showing that he was still angry at how his candidacy had been received by the convention delegates.

Smith’s performance was made especially stark when he was followed by John W. Davis’s warm and gracious speech of reconciliation and good humor. In his address, he set out what he believed the Democratic Party’s principles were: honesty in government; public trust in public office; equal rights to all men; fair and equal taxation; open door of opportunity to the humblest citizen in all the land; loyalty at home, with courage and honor abroad. “As an interested bystander, I cannot be ignorant of the fact that this convention has had its debates and its difference, and in the truly Democratic fashion, has fought out its conflicts of opinion…” He compared the scarring debate to a thunderstorm that “left shining on us the sun of coming victory and success.” The crowd responded appropriately, but few on the convention floor reflected those sentiments.297

Davis’ sentiments were completely undone by the announcement of the compromise vice presidential candidate: Nebraska Governor Charles Bryan, younger brother of William Jennings. For the Smith crowd, having successfully navigated the presidential nomination away from McAdoo and his allies, the Bryan nomination seemed a capitulation. Charles had none of the obvious political talents his brother demonstrated and all of the attendant baggage. The gallery, who had made William Jennings Bryan’s experience at the convention a colossal disappointment, revolted at the announcement and quick vote to confirm his brother. As John W. Davis accepted congratulations and began planning his campaign, he became aware of the expectations delegates had for his candidacy and the damage he had to repair. 298

The convention adjourned and the delegates headed home, over two long weeks after the convention started. The two previous nominees were failed mediators, the two front-runners bitter and resentful, and the delegates confused and resigned. John W. Davis and Charles Bryan were the party’s new standard-bearers, but the party left Manhattan on life support. A convention and election that started with such promise and real opportunity for the Democrats had been destroyed by the internal divisions and an inability to truly bridge the enormous differences. The convention also had the disastrous impact of laying bare the very worst impulses in the political process, and the Democrats had the starring role. Al Smith and William McAdoo never fully recovered from what they went through in Madison Square Garden over those two weeks, and

some of the millions who listened to the radio broadcast nationwide were disillusioned by the hallowed tradition revealed to be hollowed.\textsuperscript{299}

**1924 Presidential Election Season**

The presidential campaign was a losing effort from the moment the convention closed in Madison Square Garden. John W. Davis’ lack of exposure to electoral politics, and the Democratic Party in particular, showed immediately in his formal acceptance speech. He struggled to contrast his vision with the Republicans he was now running against. “We are prepared to offer,” Davis wrote, “a Democratic program based on Democratic principles and guaranteed by a record of Democratic performance. This program we have outlined in our platform; these principles are those by which the Democratic Party has been guided throughout the years—and which like the creed of the church should be repeated whenever Democrats assemble—a belief in equal rights to all men and special privilege to none...”\textsuperscript{300} Of course, what those Democratic ideals were was left to the imagination, reflecting a true lack of compelling party identity. This problem presaged an important part of Franklin Roosevelt’s interest in the Circular Letter, defining the Democratic Party as more than an oppositional party, with an interest in preserving its history and broadening its base. It was a complicated endeavor but an important one, and Roosevelt had the benefit of watching Davis’ effort from behind the scenes.

This lack of assurance regarding his party and its difference with the Republicans became a hallmark of Davis’ as he crossed the country giving speeches to voters: Davis continued to pose the question but with only vague responses of his own in regards to delineating the party’s contribution or appeal. It was clear Davis viewed the differences between the parties in very

\textsuperscript{299} Murray, 103rd Ballot, 230-235.
\textsuperscript{300} John W. Davis Acceptance Speech, July 1924 (Principal Speeches; Group 170, Box 153), John W. Davis Collection: Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
subtle ways, and was uninterested or ill-prepared in examining party ideology. He also received conflicting advice on where to concentrate his efforts, with Democrats from all over the country weighing in on the areas where he was not going to win and where his message would not be well-received. Davis’ speeches reflected the confusion, and he largely avoided issues and addressed only perceptions of the party. In Columbus, he told a crowd, “I was asked the other day for my definition of the difference between a Democrat and a Republican, and I suggested that in this year of grace I thought that the great outstanding distinction between the members of the two parties was this: that a Democrat wanted the record of his party remembered and a Republican wanted the record of his party forgotten.” In a speech at Rockford, Illinois, he said simply he would make Republicans answer for corruption from Harding’s administration. In Omaha, he hoped to stir the crowd’s imagination with references to Democratic greats, but James Polk and Grover Cleveland’s records did not inspire great enthusiasm, and his platitudes about Jefferson and Jackson mentioned only their “vision” and “vigor,” and nothing substantive about their imprint on the party.301

Towards the end of his campaign, Davis dropped his discussions of the Democratic Party and instead focused on the issues of the election. In Rochester, New York, he talked about dissatisfaction with the federal government and low voter morale, and smartly made personal appeals to the crowd. In Terre Haute, Indiana, he again tailored his speech to reflect only the agricultural problems that his crowd was troubled by. Finally, in Cleveland, he was confronted with the question of his own views on the Ku Klux Klan, and Davis did not shrink from the

301 John W. Davis Speech in Columbus, Ohio, August 18, 1924 (Principal Speeches; Group 170, Box 153), John W. Davis Collection: Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; John W. Davis Speech in Rockford, Illinois, September 5, 1924 (Principal Speeches; Group 170, Box 153), John W. Davis Collection: Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; John W. Davis Speech in Omaha, Nebraska, September 6, 1924 (Principal Speeches; Group 170, Box 153), John W. Davis Collection: Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 131-135; Harbaugh, Lawyer’s Lawyer, 222-224; and Murray, The 103rd Ballot, 248-250.
moment: “Whenever the day shall come that I am unwilling to lift either hand or voice in defense of that great principle (religious freedom), I trust my arm will fall palsied at my side, and my tongue will cleave to the roof of my mouth.”

But it was too little, too late. One of the major issues plaguing Davis was that he had no support from the party or from party leaders. The Democratic Party apparatus was notoriously ill-equipped to deal with a national campaign. While the Republican Party’s national headquarters ran around the clock, regardless of election cycle, the Democratic Party was shuttered in between presidential elections. Part of the tension in Madison Square Garden was because of this ill-prepared machinery. John W. Davis’ incoherent party message reflected this lack of institutional consistency, as did the press releases and campaign materials that accompanied his candidacy.

The Democratic National Committee and Campaign Materials.

The Democratic Party operated infrequently, but the Democratic Congressional Committee revived itself every two years to produce a Democratic Campaign Manual, filled with information about the candidates, the platform, and party history. The 1924 version was exceedingly dry: in the introduction, the stated purpose is to provide voters, partisan and independent alike, with material on the Democratic Party to study. The manual could be divided into three sections. The first section compared the Democratic Platform with the platforms of the Republican and Progressive Parties. This section was itemized, arranged by individual issue with the Democratic position positioned first and no commentary provided (outside of pointing out

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302 John W. Davis Speech in Rochester, New York, October 6, 1924 (Principal Speeches; Group 170, Box 154), John W. Davis Collection: Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; John W. Davis Speech in Terre Haute, October 13, 1924 (Principal Speeches; Group 170, Box 154), John W. Davis Collection: Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; John W. Davis Speech in Cleveland, Ohio, October 24, 1924 (Principal Speeches; Group 170, Box 154), John W. Davis Collection: Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut; Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 131-135; Harbaugh, Lawyer’s Lawyer, 228-231; and Murray, The 103rd Ballot, 250-252.
where the Republicans and Progressives abstained from addressing issues, like “Peace on Earth”—the Democrats rearticulating the support of Woodrow Wilson’s vision for the League of Nations—and “The Negro”—aimed at anti-lynching legislation).  

The second section was a milquetoast “biography” of John W. Davis and Charles Bryan, with sections like “The Office Seeks the Man” (describing his political rise and attendant humility), “A Human Sort of Fellow” and “Reg’lar Fellow as a Boy” (describing his folksy demeanor—contrasted with his Wall Street bona fides), and “Born on Jefferson’s Birthday” (Davis’ association with the Democratic Party was tenuous at best). Indeed, Jefferson’s name was mentioned in the manual more than any other person’s. Davis’ lack of legislative experience was papered over in favor of detailing his fairness as a lawyer. The third section was a detailed expose of every scandal possibly associated with Republicans (though Coolidge was expertly avoided), including the “Naval Oil Scandals” (Teapot Dome), attacks on farmers and small businesses, and neglect of women and African-Americans. As the party out of power, the Democrats were able to play offense, and could afford to be critical of the incumbent administration while completely overlooking anything critical of the Wilson administration.

The Democratic Congressional Committee also crafted a manual aimed at women, reflecting the evolving electorate and the potential attractiveness of Democratic values to new female voters. This campaign manual was far more user-friendly, without the dry depictions of the party platform and policy positions. Instead, the *Women’s Democratic Campaign Manual* quickly dispensed with the campaign biographies and spent more time putting the work of the Democratic Party in layman’s terms. One section spelled out the “Six Major Issues for the 1924

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303 *Democratic Campaign Book for 1924, Issued by the Democratic National Committee and the Democratic Congressional Committee* (New York: Isaac Goldman Company, 1924), 3-46.
304 *Democratic Campaign Book for 1924*, 47-79, 135-150.
The manual also focused on the real work of campaigns and party machinery, providing instruction for campaign workers, speaking on Democratic issues, and organizing local precincts. The manual provided instructions for how to prepare a sample speech on the platform, as well as talking points about the Republican opposition. An elemental part also was to diminish the appeal of the Republican Party, with several key problems spelled out, including, of course, Teapot Dome. This manual also addressed the Calvin Coolidge “myth” of his austerity in the Boston police strike, seeking to puncture his appeal as a tonic to the Harding scandals. One section cast the Republicans as taking women voters for granted, titled “Fooling the Women.” One aspect, notably missing from the campaign manual aimed at men, was a list of Democratic campaign songs and rhymes (“Poor Tommie!” and “The Tariff Monster” both blamed “Republican tariffs” for limiting wealth for working women.

What remains unclear is the impact or the wider distribution of the campaign manuals and materials. Without a full-time operation running between elections, there was considerable effort needed to resuscitate the party’s membership rolls and provide members with the necessary materials. While the effort was well-intentioned in providing potential voters with targeted information and instruction, the timing was not in the Democrats’ favor. By the time the manuals were prepared and distributed, there were just a few months to mobilize efforts and wage a successful campaign. There was also a notable incoherence in the manuals’ messaging. While it was clear that the Democratic National Committee and Democratic Congressional

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306 Women’s Democratic Campaign Manual, 102-140.
Campaign wanted to put the best face forward on the debacle in Madison Square Garden, the party leadership had no real grasp of their message and what they offered voters besides platitudes.

**Franklin Roosevelt and a Fractious Autumn.**

Franklin Roosevelt basked in the glow of his triumphant speech and presence at the convention in Madison Square Garden. The media’s praise (infantilizing though it sometimes was, as demonstrated in Chapter III) continued to roll in, but Roosevelt was about to turn that sympathy and congratulations into actionable results for himself and the party.

At the same time, Roosevelt became inundated with telegrams, messages, and letters arriving constantly, praising him for his service to the party and his brilliant performance advocating for Smith. Even those who were critical of Al Smith and the gamesmanship displayed at the convention offered near-unanimous acclaim for Roosevelt and his efforts. For many, the speech seemed to confirm what many had long suspected: that Franklin Roosevelt’s rumored and confusing illness was a passing threat and no burden to his political aspirations. Roosevelt, of course, knew that there was much more recovery required, and that one speech and two weeks of centered activities were much different than holding elective office and the exhaustion that accompanied. Repeatedly, correspondents encouraged him to run for the open governorship, but Roosevelt knew that Al Smith was due to run again to reclaim his office. Roosevelt demurred, consistently pointing to Smith’s effective leadership and enumerating his own challenges.307

Franklin Roosevelt is rather inscrutable, even in his considerable correspondence and papers. He frequently portrayed himself in the humblest of terms, refused to take concrete positions, and generally told those writing him what he thought they wanted to hear. On the issue

of his recovery and the challenges he faced, however, Franklin Roosevelt was genuinely honest and completely forthcoming. He was convinced that he would walk again, and that, just three years after his attack, that he was very near regaining his full ability. In letter after letter, he outlined the various methods and advice he had encountered and read about, and he thanked readers who sent in their own stories and experiences. Roosevelt never completely shut down discussions about his political future, but made clear that it was something that would only come after he devoted his full attention and energy to walking again.

Roosevelt’s attention in the autumn of 1924 was consumed with the ultimate split between his party and his family. As Al Smith’s campaign surrogate in the Madison Square Garden convention, Roosevelt became synonymous with the governor. In many ways, Roosevelt articulated Smith’s positions far better than Smith ever could. The New York State conventions were held in early September, limiting the campaign to mere weeks rather than months. Naturally, Roosevelt re-nominated Smith, but he was caught off-guard when the Republicans nominated his cousin, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr.

Ted Jr.’s candidacy was a potential nightmare for Franklin. His nomination as vice president in 1920 was widely viewed as a nod to both his energy and famous last name, particularly after President/Colonel Roosevelt passed away in early 1919. The Oyster Bay branch of the family swiftly mobilized to fight any suggestion that the two sides were close, and Franklin was slow to correct reporters and supporters who connected him to the late leader. Ted Jr. and his widowed mother, Edith, put out word that Franklin was not of Theodore’s brand, but there was little fear that the campaign would be successful. Now, the situation was reversed, and for Franklin, the stakes were high.308

Much of Franklin Roosevelt’s political career was predicated on being seen as the heir to his famous relative and the family’s legacy. Now that he was sidelined with a debilitating illness and a murky political future, the idea that he was being passed over by his famous cousin’s actual son was potentially a large setback. If Ted Jr. was successful, the New York governorship retained a position of prominence in either party. With his father’s legacy, Ted Jr.’s political future would be set as a leader of the Republican Party nationally.

Eleanor and Franklin understood the stakes of staying on the sidelines. Not only did they pledge loyalty to Al Smith, but they had the added interest in Franklin’s future. Franklin signed on again as campaign spokesman, fielding press inquiries and correspondence to the Smith campaign. Eleanor was much more overt: she outfitted her car to resemble a giant replica of a teapot, and, along with her sons or other Smith supporters (and occasionally, Franklin), stalked Ted Jr.’s speaking engagements. Wherever the Republican candidate went, his cousin followed, attracting attention to the spectacle while serving to remind voters of the Republican Party’s corrupt Teapot Dome scandal. While Ted Jr. was never implicated in the Harding scandals, Eleanor made sure to emphasize his association with the party’s less savory aspects. In doing this, Eleanor risked her future relationship with her family, clearly staking her loyalty with the Democratic Smith over her blood.309

Inadvertently, Ted Jr. helped limit John W. Davis’ chances more than he could have imagined. It was clear that the nominee could have used all the help he could get on the stump, but there were few surrogates able to help him make his pitch. William Jennings Bryan retired to Florida to recuperate after the disastrous convention, and William Gibbs McAdoo had no interest

in supporting yet another nominee who usurped his ascension.\textsuperscript{310} Ted Jr. dealt the final blow to Davis’ support: Al Smith was locked into a more fierce gubernatorial campaign than he anticipated, and Franklin Roosevelt was tied up as his spokesman.

The absence of a strong contest in New York probably would not have helped matters. Nationally, the Democrats were headed towards an overwhelming defeat, but Smith managed to eke out a small victory, with his smallest voting percentage of his winning gubernatorial elections, 50% to 47%. This was actually impressive, considering that in the presidential election, New York voted overwhelmingly for Calvin Coolidge, 55% to 29%. The result held almost nationally, reinforcing New York’s role as a microcosm of the country: John Davis receiving just 29% of the popular vote and winning only twelve states in the Old Confederacy and Oklahoma. Robert LaFollette’s Progressive bid secured 17% of the popular vote, but he won only in Wisconsin, leaving Calvin Coolidge to dominate 54% of the vote and the remaining states.\textsuperscript{311} While LaFollette’s message cut into Davis’ ability to appeal to progressive and disaffected Democrats, it was not enough to alter the results; Coolidge would have likely won in any case. Coolidge was no avid campaigner, but his party’s infrastructure was consistent and effective nationally. The Democratic Party was simply unable to compete as it was constructed at the time.

The party was a wreck and it was setting itself up for failure: constructing and fighting over a platform and electing a nominee in such a confined and contentious timeframe was clearly

\textsuperscript{310} In fact, McAdoo took great pleasure in the Democratic defeat, sending out “I told you so” messages to detractors, and told his friend Tom Chadbourne: “I am having a lot of letters asking my advice as to what ought to be done for the Party, but I have said nothing thus far and maybe I shall say nothing at all.” Murray, \textit{103rd Ballot}, 264-265.

not a recipe for success. John Davis, a virtual unknown nationwide, had no input on the controversial platform he was now expected to espouse across the country, and a fractured party that was unable to coalesce. Franklin Roosevelt recognized these problems, and went to work on creating a solution. In the aftermath of the November election, Franklin Roosevelt sent out his Circular Letter, soliciting analysis from the Democratic Party leaders and bitter followers, while also offering his own (vague) suggestions that he believed would create a consensus for the divided delegates. Franklin Roosevelt seized the controls of the Democratic Party in late 1924, and the party and the nation would never be the same.
CHAPTER IV. SEIZING CONTROL: FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT AND THE CIRCULAR LETTER OF 1924

The Democratic Party was deeply wounded after the Madison Square Garden convention, and circumstances did not immediately improve. John W. Davis, the party’s compromise nominee, hurriedly tried to assume the party’s mantle for the angry electorate and campaign, on a divisive platform that he had no input in creating. The Democrats were destroyed in the general election, especially when the Progressive Party fielded Robert LaFollette and battled for the Democrat’s disaffected voters. The result was the largest rout in the twentieth century: the difference between Calvin Coolidge’s vote total and Davis’ was the second largest (only to Harding’s win over Cox four years before), but his vote total, 29% of the final vote, was the lowest for any Democrat. There was no obvious silver lining.

In the weeks following the election, however, Franklin Roosevelt quickly changed the narrative. Seizing on the devastated party and the notable lack of leadership, Roosevelt maneuvered to fill the void, asserting himself as the head of the party and never truly relinquishing the control. Roosevelt’s party leadership was always one of studied humility or Machiavellian cunning: he never truly took credit (or assumed titular recognition) for his machinations. In 1920, he played the role of vice presidential candidate to the hilt, matching James Cox step-for-step as they crossed the country in an unsuccessful effort. At the convention earlier in 1924, he played the assigned role (with additional responsibilities he sought) of Al Smith’s mouthpiece and floor manager, putting his personal ambition aside as he sought to elect his fellow New Yorker. Now, he assumed the mantle of concerned party elder, expertly disguising any possible future ambition for himself behind concern for the party. In composing his Circular Letter, sent to the delegates from the Madison Square Garden convention and other
party leaders, Roosevelt completed his evolution by directing the party on how it should focus going forward. In soliciting ideas from the delegates, he recognized that they spoke for their constituencies: they were the decision-makers of the party at the most basic level, serving as intermediaries between the disorganized national party and the increasingly disinterested local voter. By recognizing the delegates, Roosevelt gave agency to an often underutilized and overlooked part of the party’s apparatus, and most respondents thanked him for asking their opinions.

This dissertation is the first work to critically analyze this important moment in the Democratic Party’s development and in Franklin Roosevelt’s political life. After analyzing Roosevelt’s rhetoric, it is easy to take him at his word and view his actions as selfless and party-focused. But, it is important to recognize that Franklin Roosevelt was extremely careful and cautious with his messaging, both in his recorded letters and memories of the events of this era, and the practiced responses he provided the press and correspondents. In analyzing his correspondence, it is clear that Roosevelt was uncertain about his health and the perception that his paralysis engendered. Any rush to declare his intentions would have been ill-formed and politically dangerous, so his caution was not without reason. It is also essential to remember that Roosevelt was always ambitious and drawn to service, craving the spotlight and adulation of those around him, and constantly forward-thinking. In this moment, in late 1924, Roosevelt married his ambition with caution, casting himself as savior of the Democratic Party without any vote or campaign. At the worst, if Roosevelt’s Circular Letter was unsuccessful, the party would be no worse off for a former leader meddling. At best, Roosevelt would receive credit for helping build the party back, and he would reap the benefits of a party in his image.
This chapter focuses on the Circular Letter of 1924, discussing the motivations that went into writing and sending out the letter, its contents, and the responses from across the country. With the Circular Letter, Franklin Roosevelt began the process of asserting himself as a party leader and reforming the party to fit his conceptions. The responses to the Circular Letter are housed at the Franklin Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, where they are arranged alphabetically by state. Though there were over three thousand letters sent, according to Roosevelt’s estimation, the holdings consist of over three hundred letters received; some were detailed responses, while some were simple agreements with the contents of Roosevelt’s initial letter. This chapter examines the substantive responses from delegates and party leaders providing an in-depth examination of the disparate voices of a political party on the brink of disaster or rebirth. The letters are grouped in this chapter, in Section III, by topic.

The Circular Letter of 1924 is essential to understanding the political education of Franklin Roosevelt and his reemergence as Democratic Party leader. This chapter also interrogates two unforeseen issues: Roosevelt’s struggle to define the Democratic Party outside of its opposition to the Republicans, and the unanticipated responses to his letter. Far from unanimous assent to Franklin Roosevelt’s ideas, the Circular Letter responses revealed deep-seated tensions that went further than the Madison Square Garden debacle and required much more work than Roosevelt anticipated.

The Circular Letter of 1924 marked a definitive turning point in the Democratic Party and in Franklin Roosevelt’s political career, and this dissertation will be the first to critically analyze the responses and reaction. Without this effort, the Democratic Party might well have died a slow death in the aftermath of the calamitrous convention and the polarized electorate. Roosevelt might have faded into relative obscurity, popping up every now and then at conventions and New York
functions, but without any true purpose. Instead, one of the greatest political revolutions took root in the weeks after the 1924 election and one of the greatest politicians methodically started carving out a party that would propel him to political victory, setting the course for one of the most transformational presidencies in history.

**Franklin Roosevelt’s Attempts at Party Unity**

Franklin Roosevelt’s interest in the party infrastructure was not a new concern. His nomination as vice president in 1920 was his exposure to the party’s deficiencies. As soon as he and James Cox accepted their nominations, temporary Democratic national chairman George White briefed them on the party’s finances, or lack thereof. In yet another limiting move, the Democratic Party allowed the nominee, whether winning or losing, to choose the party chairman, to serve through the election four years later. White had been chosen by James Cox to serve through 1924, and was surprised to find the coffers nearly empty. Cox and Roosevelt were tasked with helping raise funds to pay for the Democratic National Committee’s activities from their nomination through the election. If the money was not forthcoming, the candidates would need to loan the campaign the funds from their own pockets. The two candidates were shocked, especially Roosevelt, who considered himself a fiscal hawk and an enemy of the city bosses who thrived under these conditions. Requiring the party’s political leaders to serve as fundraisers (and bankrollers, in this case) would prove a real barrier to attracting a caliber of candidates who were not privately funded or part of city machinery.

The issue of organization was not confined to just finances, though. In March 1921, a letter was sent to the “Temporary Organization-Committee of Democrats, State of New York,” discussing a meeting held for the “future of the Democratic Party.” Among the participants were former governor Al Smith, Henry Morgenthau, Gordon Auchincloss, and Franklin Roosevelt.
The letter-writers asked recipients to help strengthen the state party’s infrastructure by sending $100 to help raise over $30,000 in two years, so that the party might not operate at a deficit in the near future.312

The efforts did not stop there. In the July 1921 issue of the *The Century*, Glenn Frank wrote about the Democratic Party hiring Robert Goldsmith as a researcher to provide the elected leaders of the party some coherence of vision. Frank noted that too often, the parties relied on the nominated candidates to provide vision and policy, and the parties and government suffered from the inconsistency. Frank compared the Republican and Democratic Parties to the British, who kept their parties running around the clock and used their elected officials much less discriminately, but the British parliamentary system was vastly different from the American model. Still, Frank noted that the Democratic Party leadership would be wise to pay attention to Goldsmith’s findings, and the Republicans would be wise to replicate it.313

Roosevelt clearly read and absorbed the article (he was sent the article by correspondents, as well). In October 1921, Roosevelt sent a letter to the members of the Democratic National Committee, a dry-run of his 1924 Circular Letter. Roosevelt was only recently able to write again, after his debilitating affliction two months before. While it is unclear how much he wrote himself, the copy of the letter in his files had his edits, crossing out many sections and emphasizing other parts. In the letter, he wrote that as the vice presidential candidate from the year previous, he had thought about the challenges of the national party and had remedy for them. Showing up every four years and attempting to gauge the interest of the entire party was a fool’s errand, Roosevelt argued. Presaging the 1924 debacle, he cautioned: “A

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platform hurriedly concocted in the turmoil of a national convention and representing only too often an eleventh hour compromise, will only by accident truthfully represent the real ideals of the party’s rank and file. Hectic efforts and campaign speeches in the months before a national election will not be sufficient to clearly present these arguments to the voters of the country generally, particularly in the face of the misrepresentation and distortion of such principles as other political parties have been known to broadcast.”

Roosevelt called out his Democratic colleagues, saying that the “machinery of our Republican opponents is more efficient than our own.” He suggested mobilizing the party leaders in each state to regularly poll the interests of its voting members, and to pass that information on to party leaders in Congress and serving as governors. He also demanded a regular conference of party leaders from each state and the national apparatus, and a more regular schedule for selecting the party chairman. He made mention of his malady, conveying his regret at being unable to address the leaders in person, but suggested that the gravity of the situation made this letter necessary. Also, Roosevelt prioritizing the national committee’s mistakes and problems, at a time when his political and personal future were still uncertain, lent credibility to his suggestion that this issue was as ominous as he indicated.

In a follow-up letter to Cordell Hull, Roosevelt again stated his belief that a regular conference was essential. Hull assumed chairmanship of the Democratic Party in mid-1921 after George White stepped down. Roosevelt made sure Hull understood the contents of his letter to the other committee members and enclosed an extra copy for insurance. While Hull responded that he was in agreement with Roosevelt’s insistence that action be taken, Hull suggested yet

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315 Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Democratic National Committee.
another “joint committee on the coordination of political activities,” made up of over thirty party members, to focus on “teamwork among these great party agencies.” While not a complete dismissal of Roosevelt’s intentions, it was clear that Hull had other remedies for the Democrats’ organizational problems and he paid no further attention to Roosevelt’s letter. This likely informed Roosevelt’s decision to go over the heads of the party powers and appeal directly to the party’s delegates and faithful in 1924. Between 1921 and 1924, there were no measurable differences in party structure or the way the national party committee interacted with state parties or politicians. The 1924 convention proceeded much as previous conventions had, with the disastrous outcome adding insult to injury. While party leaders despaired at the results of the Madison Square Garden proceedings, Franklin Roosevelt was able to recover his warning from three years previous and renew calls for change.\footnote{Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Cordell Hull, November 4, 1921 (FDR General Correspondence, A-Z, 1920-1928), Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; and Letter, Cordell Hull to Franklin Roosevelt, November 18, 1921 (FDR General Correspondence, A-Z, 1920-1928), Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.}

Immediately after the election, Roosevelt began receiving letters from outraged and despondent Democrats, and he began formulating the Circular Letter he intended to send in early December, one month after the results were processed. To Senator Alva Adams of Colorado, he despaired over LaFollette’s ability to sway Democrats to the Progressive ticket, writing that immediate action needed to be taken by the Democrats to reassert themselves as the true progressive and liberal party instead of trying to beat the Republicans as the more conservative party. He decried the monetary advantage Republicans held nationwide, as well.\footnote{Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Alva Adams, November 12, 1924 (FDR General Correspondence, A-Z, 1920-1928), Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.}
P.W. Reeves and other Democrats wrote to Roosevelt, already begging him to run in 1928. Roosevelt responded to all these queries swiftly and consistently, redirecting their attention to the

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\footnote{Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Alva Adams, November 12, 1924 (FDR General Correspondence, A-Z, 1920-1928), Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.}
pertinent problem of the Democratic Party’s ideology and infrastructure. “Our party,” he wrote, “is obviously in need of getting back to the great essential things which distinguish a Democrat from a Republican and to unite on these real issues in an appeal to the country. We have allowed this man and that man to preach in the name of Democracy and to claim as a Democratic doctrine this thing or that thing which is after all only a secondary issue.” Democrats, he cautioned, could not spend the intervening years advocating for one candidate over another, and settling the old scores that appeared in Madison Square Garden. In one telling section, Roosevelt revealed his belief about the direction in which the Democratic Party was headed: “I believe that the majority of the voters in this country are at heart progressive. I believe that the Republican Party is absolutely reactionary and conservative and in those beliefs I find an assurance in my own mind that eventually the Democratic Party will again receive the compliment of a majority of voters.” It was only the party’s structure getting in the way of progress.318

In a letter to Edwin Meredith, Secretary of Agriculture under Wilson and a former Populist, he articulated the main deficiency that the Democrats faced: “One thing is certain to my mind and that is that our present policy of trying to create a national organization within the first two weeks following a nomination and in placing a new man, no matter how good he may be, in charge of a piece of machinery with whose operation he is entirely unfamiliar is radically wrong.” He pointed out one of the great contradictions he faced when arguing against other Democratic leaders: “I do not agree with those who sorrowfully shake their heads and say this cannot be done because we cannot get the money. The reason we have not got the money is

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because we have never shown either the inclination or the ability as a national organization to spend it intelligently in keeping up a vigorous fight between presidential years.”

It was in his letter to Edwin Meredith that Franklin Roosevelt first articulated his rationale and process of writing and distributing the Circular Letter of 1924. He outlined his plan to send a circular letter to every delegate at the convention (in addition to party leaders), “because they are obviously good Democrats (and) interested in the party.” He added that, because delegates were often not elected officials representing their district or state, they would be free to criticize the party apparatus as they saw fit. His message would be better received by party leaders if he could claim that he had the support of the party faithful, even if it was in vague terms. If Roosevelt again demanded a conference of leaders, as in 1921, after he solicited the responses of Democratic field-workers and supporters, his request could not be ignored.

Roosevelt also began discussing a second motive for writing the letter: his interest in setting the direction of the party in the aftermath of the election. Clearly, the idea of setting an ideological framework for the Democratic Party was important to him. It was also essential to define the Democratic Party as progressive. To Meredith, he wrote, “It is hopeless for the Democrats to try and wear the livery of the conservative. If we should do that we would cease to be real Democrats and would foreswear the fundamental principles of the Democratic Party. It is equally certain that we have failed to impress the liberal minds of the country with the sincerity of our liberalism and our progressiveness.” I argue in Chapter V that Franklin Roosevelt did not necessarily understand these terms outside of the labels prescribed, and articulating what made the Democrats progressive and the Republicans conservative in this period was one of his

320 Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Edwin Meredith.
primary challenges, leading Roosevelt to consult historians and journalists. But, differentiating between the Democratic and Republican Parties was a savvy move, and one that would serve Roosevelt well going forward. He concluded his letter promising to apprise Meredith of the responses to his Circular Letter, ending on an ominous note: “I am in hopes it will be helpful. It will certainly be interesting.”

**Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter of 1924**

From the outset, Roosevelt used his letter to clearly position himself as the party’s leader. He sent the letter to over three thousand party officials and leaders, as well as each delegate (as promised), using his extensive address list, accumulated through years of party business, clubs like the Woodrow Wilson Peace Club, and Christmas card lists. Notably, he went over the heads of the party’s official apparatus, appealing directly to the delegates and leaders themselves. He addressed each letter individually, expertly disguising the form letter. In the introduction, he claimed that party leaders had asked what he believed should be done to make the party “stronger and more militant nationally.” Roosevelt pointed out that the party had relative strength within individual states, but when expanded, it became far weaker, and he wanted to solicit theories from delegates and party leaders as to why that was the case.

Roosevelt began by laying out what he claimed were five fundamental truths of the Democratic Party. The first was one of his biggest complaints throughout the early 1920s, that the Democratic National Committee should function all year, every year, instead of just during

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321 Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Edwin Meredith.
322 Franklin Roosevelt was one of several nominal chairmen of the Woodrow Wilson Peace League, and allowed his name on the League’s letterhead. He was assured there would be little required in the way of actual duties, but he was intrigued by the mailing lists.
presidential election cycles—a very basic idea (and one that Republicans had long employed).

The second point was that the National Committee and State committees should be working closer together. Of course, this measure was dependent on stronger organizational structure at the national committee level, but Roosevelt’s point was that the party should have universal values that were interchangeable and consistent to the party’s brand.324

The third point was one of the biggest controversies: that of funding. Roosevelt had beaten the drum for better funding for years by this point, and he was sure to make his point here. The fourth principle related directly to the third: that the Democratic National Committee should be responsible for keeping up the publicity of the party, regardless of election season. Shutting down and restarting the presses was expensive, and was proving costly. Failing to relay the party’s nuanced positions on the pertinent issues of the day left the candidates at a disadvantage and the party faithful in the dark. The internal division evident at Madison Square Garden was owed in large part to the disparate factions falling out of touch with each other. There was no consistency in terms of message, and the problem was exacerbated by the party adapting its principles to fit the lead candidate, rather than having a consistent and well-known (and well-publicized) set that could be widely disseminated, as Republicans had perfected. Finally, Roosevelt stated that the Democratic Party leaders needed to meet much more frequently, ensuring that the disparate voices of Democrats nationwide were being heard and accounted for. Roosevelt’s insistence on regular face-to-face meetings of party leaders was not a new demand, but consent from the respondents would be helpful.325

324 FDR Circular Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Charles Murphy; Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 150-151; Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 773-774; Savage, Roosevelt: The Party Leader, 6-7; Murray, 103rd Ballot, 269-270; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 102-103.
325 FDR Circular Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Charles Murphy; Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 150-151; Davis, FDR: Beckoning of Destiny, 773-774; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 102-103.
There was nothing completely revolutionary in the Circular Letter, and that was likely the point. In writing the letter, Roosevelt wanted to bridge a consensus among a fractious and wounded group. In offering the fundamentals, he was able to show the fractured party that there were specific problems, and solutions that could be enacted, that could bring the party back together again. The Republican Party, in Roosevelt’s view, “stands for conservatism, and for the control of the social and economic structure of the nation by a small minority of hand-picked associates.” In contrast, the Democrats were “unequivocally the party of progress and liberal thought,” but this was sullied by their inability to try to find a consensus. He then asked all the recipients of the letter to respond to him on any disagreement he or she had with his assessment, and what, in their minds, were the chief issues to be dealt with by the Democratic Party. He closed with his central point, and one that he hoped would guide the responses: “It is not a matter of personalities or candidates, but a matter of principles.”

Franklin Roosevelt was not prepared for the responses that would flood in. Rather than providing a consensus, or results that he could point to when discussing the party among other leaders, the letter opened the floodgates for the pent-up frustrations the Democratic Party faithful had been experiencing and struggling to overcome. If the episode at Madison Square Garden in June had been a death, Franklin Roosevelt was performing the post-mortem with his Circular Letter. With the responses, Franklin Roosevelt became a more conscientious party member, which only enhanced his abilities as a future candidate and leader, making him far more clear in his communications and attuned to fellow Democrats’ concerns. He also positioned himself to be the man who helped rescue the Democratic Party by identifying its problems and seeking solutions.

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Responses to the Circular Letter

The responses flooded in from all corners of the country from mid-December through February 1925. At the Franklin Roosevelt Library, his collection of responses included over 300 pieces of correspondence, arranged alphabetically by state and representing every state in the country (for the regional breakdown, according to major issue addressed, see chart in Appendix). While there were several politicians who responded, a large portion of the saved responses were from the delegates, both male and female. This section divides the responses according to the major divisions evident in the responses and the number of responses by region. While many historians have made mention of the 1924 Circular Letter as evidence of Franklin Roosevelt’s political activity in this pivotal period in his political development, no one has detailed the responses that the Circular Letter of 1924 engendered. The responses revealed several glaring problems of the Democratic Party of the 1920s at the organizational and individual levels. But, as would be expected, they also revealed a lot of wrangling over the symptoms of Democratic disunity; it would be up to Franklin Roosevelt to remedy the disease. In order to chart Franklin Roosevelt’s political future, from the governorship in 1928 and presidential run in the 1932 onward, it is essential to understand the political reality that his candidacy and party leadership was confronting. In the responses to the Circular Letter of 1924, we are able to understand what Franklin Roosevelt faced as Democratic Party leader in terms of reconciling the various factions for future political success.

Consensus Among the Respondents.

A good number of the respondents agreed with Franklin Roosevelt’s assessment of the principles of the Democratic Party and his suggestion of what must be done to remedy the issues expressed. The phrase, “Agreed as to the five fundamentals,” was repeated continuously
throughout the array by 177 of the 303 respondents. Most delegates moved quickly through that section of the letter and went directly into their grievances. In fact, very few of the respondents expressed a satisfaction with the direction of the party. But, it should be noted that none of the responses suggested that the respondents knew exactly how to go about effecting change. Some responses were downright specific, ordering the Democratic Party to avoid controversial subjects, while some wanted the Democrats to be unanimous in their efforts as a truly progressive or liberal party. To some, the floor-fight at the convention never should have taken place: not over the League of Nations, prohibition, or the Klan. This was not only because the issues were divisive, but because these issues should have been thoroughly considered before debate on the convention floor. Still more responses echoed Roosevelt’s call to spend the four years between elections not on campaigning and torpedoing potential candidates, but on strengthening the party organizationally and trying to find unity for the disparate factions.327

Many of the responses were succinct, and revealed savvy political operators who had years and decades of experience as active and mobilized Democrats. Judging from the responses, many delegates had long-held observations and complaints, but the Democratic Party had never truly provided an outlet for the airing of these grievances. Instead, due to the awkward and damaging schedule and inefficient party apparatus, the tensions exploded at the most inopportune times: in front of the voting public at the raucous conventions. Almost every single response contained advice borne out of sadness for the spectacle that the Democrats had made in New York City and fear of where the party was headed.

One other notable reaction shared by delegates and leaders was that the responses focused on the presidential election result and the problems as related to the national party

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327 Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 149-151.
apparatus. Most respondents mentioned that the party was organized very well on a local and statewide level, with many marveling at the number of Democratic governors, or the party’s relative strength in both houses of Congress. In many ways, this made the presidential election results all the more problematic, and an opportunity for real improvement, as the Democratic Party had strong support nationwide, but it was badly mismanaged and suffering from a lack of direction and shared vision.

Finally, the responses were near-unanimous in their deference to and respect for Franklin Roosevelt and his efforts in writing the letter. By extending the letter to delegates and not limiting the responses to party leaders, Roosevelt ensured that the vast majority of respondents would be impressed by his performance at the convention and his apparent selflessness in taking the mantle of party leader. Still, Roosevelt was not prepared for the inundation of complaints and his correspondents’ dissatisfaction.

**Focus on Personalities and Principles.**

One of the more common responses throughout the letters was the idea that “personalities (were) trumping principles.”328 Or, in the words of Charles Brough of Arkansas, “We have emphasized too many personalities in our party conventions the past eight years and have not emphasized the immortality of Democratic principles sufficiently.”329 Forty-four respondents included the phrase or referred to the party’s misplaced emphasis on personalities and not on exemplifying the party’s principles, with seventeen responses coming from the Midwest, the one region without a major candidate in the 1924 nominating convention.

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328 FDR Circular Letter Response, V.Y Daliman to Franklin Roosevelt, December 19, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; and FDR Circular Letter Response, Bruce Campbell to Franklin Roosevelt, December 23, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. These were mere samples of the many respondents who echoed similar sentiments, even down to the exact phrasing.

One of the more shocking developments of the disastrous convention was that the choice between William McAdoo and Al Smith concerned the men’s private lives and avoided discussion over principles. Perhaps the correspondents should have viewed this as a preview of the future of presidential politics, but the recent nominations might have clouded their judgment. McAdoo’s father-in-law cast a long shadow and some delegates were cautious of McAdoo’s perceived association with the Teapot Dome. With Smith, Democrats read reports about his drinking habits and rumors about his Catholic faith, particularly that he was a mouthpiece for the Pope. Previous nominees like William Jennings Bryan, Alton Parker, and Woodrow Wilson had not had their private lives interrogated in the same way; the nominations were determined quickly and with far more regard for political record and geographical advantage. With the party so split regionally and ideologically, front-runner status had turned into liability, and McAdoo and Smith both suffered as much for their private lives as their political liabilities.

Roosevelt wrote about this issue in the conclusion of his letter: “It is not, I take it, a matter of personalities or candidates, but a matter of principles. If in the next three years we stop wasting time in booming or opposing this man or that for a nomination four years away, and devote ourselves instead to organizing for party principles for the taking advantage of our opponents errors and omissions...”\(^\text{330}\) For a party with the fissures that the Democrats now had, blaming the fracas on misplaced “booming” (or promoting) candidates was understandable. With the McAdoo and Smith forces so devoted to their candidates and intractable in the idea of compromise, the front-runners appeared to have staved off the possibility that any compromise candidate had a fighting chance of gaining the support of the united party. But, Roosevelt’s message seemed to blame front-runners and their supporters for exacerbating the ideological and

\(^{330}\) FDR Circular Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Charles Murphy.
regional divisions. Instead, the two major candidates were front-runners because of the divisions. That did not stop the respondents from weighing in on his idea and offering their own suggestions. Daniel Carrington Imboden of California wrote that Democrats needed a former general, for the sterling military record and perceived orderly life. Alice Cordell of Arkansas recommended, “thinking more about the party and less about the man we wished nominated.” Several respondents invoked the legacy of former party leaders, as when Ed Leake from California or W.A. Covington from Florida wrote about the “fundamental and immutable principles...were the same now as they were in the days of Jefferson, Jackson, Tilden, Cleveland, and Wilson.” Leake and Covington neglected to enumerate exactly which principles these past leaders demonstrated to Democrats of the 1920s. That very vagueness of party identity was part of what caused the conflict between the Democratic Party; however, what was regarded as fundamental by one group and as attachment to the legacy of a Founding Father (whether of the nation or party) was clearly a tenuous thread to bind the party together.

Party Leadership (or Lack Thereof).

Part and parcel of the problem with the focus on personalities over party principles was the party faithful’s desire for strong party leadership. This was one of the great failures of the Democratic Party in the early twentieth century. As detailed in Chapter I, the Democratic Party continuously wrestled with the idea of who headed the party and provided focus. There were three possible candidates, always: the leader of the Congressional Democrats; the party’s

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nominee for president; and the party’s erstwhile chairmen. But, with so many nominal heads of the party (and the presidential nominees now frequently marginalized by their general election performance), there was a definite lack of focus for Democrats, and the problems festered throughout the years intervening between elections. There were references to a lack of effective party leadership in 176 of the responses, split evenly across the geographic regions.

In 1924, this issue was truly fraught with tension. Claude Kitchin of North Carolina was the House Minority Leader, taking over for Champ Clark (the former Speaker), while Oscar Underwood (thorn in the side of William McAdoo and the Ku Klux Klan for much of 1924) served as Senate Majority leader. Far from providing party leadership, these men were more consumed with keeping the increasingly disparate forces in the party aligned with the party’s Congressional aims than the national party’s progress. Congressmen also tended to view themselves as beholden to their local constituency far more than the party’s apparatus, allowing the regional schisms to grow.

Congressmen viewed themselves as distanced from the executive branch, as evidenced by Woodrow Wilson’s attitude towards Congress throughout his tenure. Even when the Democrats maintained majorities in both houses and had Wilson in the White House, Wilson viewed Congress as political opposition and not shared ambition. Neither William McAdoo nor Al Smith mentioned their relationship with Congress or any ideas of a legislative agenda in their campaigns, and John W. Davis never addressed that branch, either. Both the congressional leaders and candidates (and nominees) seemed to view their elected service as the public’s representative, rather than as partisan leader, but the reality of the changing political climate made this view foolish.

Further, the National Committee leader was almost the exact reverse, supposedly
consumed only with the party’s platform and principles. In practice, the men tasked with heading the Democratic National Committee (in recent years: Vance McCormick, Homer Cummings, George White, and Cordell Hull), were far too overwhelmed by their party’s short-comings and the desperate need for available cash to be at all successful in setting party policy or platforms. The party was still years away from providing directed guidance to committees for Congressional policy, gubernatorial efforts, and local/state elections, and soliciting funds remained a priority.

Still, respondents weighed in on the lack of leadership for Democrats experiencing a time of great upheaval, uncertainty, and, increasingly, fractious in-fighting, the kind that the convention laid bare. James Ellis of Alabama wrote that the Democratic Party had “an overdose of leadership,” with too many “peanut politics,” while Jessie Daniel Ames of Texas blamed selfish and near-sighted leaders. D.S. Ewing of California wrote that the party and convention had no leadership whatsoever, with too many issues to be acted upon and too little effort resolved to bridging the party’s divisions. Robert Larkin of Illinois mis-diagnosed the lack of leadership as a concern only over the last four years, while Porteus Burke of Louisiana blamed unqualified Southerners in leadership positions as the chief problem. Oscar Kimmel of Illinois wrote that the current leadership needed purged, while Robert Crain of Washington, D.C., urged Roosevelt to take command himself.332

Franklin Roosevelt was careful in responding to the anger and disappointment directed at party leadership. His position in writing the letter had put him in a place of privilege: he was often blameless for the party’s deplorable state, but was clearly trying to position himself to take the mantle of party leader in the near future. He had to make sure to exorcise the demons before he could begin to repair the party, as well as collecting evidence of the party’s dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs.

**Agonizing Over the Two-Thirds Rule.**

The respondents to the Circular Letter were not divisive on every issue. One notable constructive suggestion was removing the rule requiring a two-thirds majority of delegates for nomination. The party’s leaders increasingly viewed the rule as unreasonable given the current tensions, and were able to point to the party’s inefficiency at actually winning as proof that the measure might be well-founded but harmful to the party. Twenty-two letters contained a reference to removing the two-thirds and/or unit rules, with almost half coming from the West, and seven from the Midwest. These two regions were frequently left out of the nominating proceedings, with the Northeast and Southern delegations frequently engaging in gamesmanship to determine the party’s nominee (and undermine the opposing region’s success). Notably, there was only one letter from the Northeast urging the removal of this rule.

Much of the tension that came to a boil at Madison Square Garden in the summer of 1924 was a result of long-standing traditions that many Democrats accepted were becoming outmoded. There is no better example of this than the two-thirds rule. Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren designed the measure at the 1832 Democratic Convention, with the hope that the rule would project unity, for a party still in its infancy and struggling to define itself outside
of focus on Jackson’s cult of personality. If the Democratic nominee was required to have the support of two-thirds of the party’s voting body, the thinking went, it would send a message of strength beyond regional or single-issue support, making the Democrats the first truly national party.

The two-thirds rule worked in practice for some time. Between 1832 and 1912, the convention rarely required more than two ballots. In these conventions, the two-thirds rule allowed the convention to aptly focus on the party’s platform behind a consensus candidate. But, in the conventions directly before the Civil War (to nominate James Polk, the first truly “dark-horse” nominee in 1844; Franklin Pierce, another dark-horse, in 1852; James Buchanan in 1856; and Stephen Douglas in 1860), the party acceded to compromise candidates only after pitched deadlock, and the two-third rule became a case of placating the Southern delegates.

The two-thirds rule required a strong party apparatus: if the front-runners were denied the nomination by the rule, and a compromise candidate was required, the party machinery had to run perfectly to ensure that the candidate had the necessary support; this led to the party being overly reliant on the dominance of Jim Crow South. The Democratic Party was notoriously deficient in this regard, with only Grover Cleveland succeeding as a presidential candidate from the party during this period. The convention delegates correctly gauging the mood of the electorate was an imperfect process. For instance, William Jennings Bryan won the support of the convention floor three times from 1896 to 1908, owing in large part to his theatrical performances at the convention podium, but that support did not translate to appeal for the national electorate.

In recent conventions, however, the two-thirds rule made the deadlock and compromise candidates a necessary component, especially as the Democratic Party started expanding in
disparate directions. In 1912, Woodrow Wilson was able to emerge as the nominee only after Champ Clark’s opposition balked at his nomination and the party eventually embraced Wilson’s progressive messaging after a record forty-six ballots. The two-thirds rule also prevented William Jennings Bryan from running for office in 1912 or 1920, as he was assured that he would never receive the support of two-thirds of delegates only to lose for the fourth time. His victory, as mentioned in Chapter I, was an anomaly: he did not have the support of the convention in any passionate way, and his candidacy was buoyed only by Theodore Roosevelt destroying the Republican Party with his Bull Moose bid.

The 1920 convention had been similarly stunted, this time by Wilson’s refusal to take himself out of the running as the nominee until the very last minute. Wilson’s son-in-law William McAdoo begrudgingly removed himself from candidacy, though only after it became clear that he would not win the two-thirds majority without Wilson’s endorsement. Attorney General Mitchell Palmer was in similar straits, and the party turned to James Cox as a compromise candidate, but only after forty-three ballots. His superlative campaign effort could not erase the glaring lack of full-throated support. The 1920 battle served as a harbinger for a fractured convention electorate, but there was no preparation for the 1924 convention.

The two-thirds rule destroyed many candidacies by requiring a super-majority of delegates, but an unintended consequence was empowering some of the defeated candidates to have bargaining leverage. William Jennings Bryan was the first tactician of this process, using his power as king-maker in 1912 and 1920; he could not gain the majority or two-thirds necessary, but had enough support to deprive his adversaries the nomination, as well. This convention practice was perfected in the twin tragic candidacies of 1924, William McAdoo and Al Smith. Both men entered the Madison Square Garden proceedings virtually assured that they
would not win the required two-thirds vote, but were optimistic that compromises and dealings offered a glimmer of hope. When the balloting dragged on, both men quickly turned to the secondary function of the two-thirds rule: preventing their hated rival from getting the majority. The result, all-too-familiar to Democrats, was a compromise candidate and a hastily organized national party apparatus valiantly trying to rally a dispassionate base on a toothless platform.

Not a single respondent to Franklin Roosevelt’s Circular Letter defended the two-thirds rule. Where there was disagreement was about how much the convention’s and party’s current conflicts were owed to the rule, and how the rule impacted the proceedings. Colorado Governor William Sweet, for instance, blamed the two-thirds rule for prolonging the convention, which allowed bitterness to fester and forced unprepared candidates to the foreground to affect a compromise. Norman Shafroth of Colorado, like many Westerners, suspected the party machine bosses wherever conflict was uncovered. Here, he blamed the “Tammany, New Jersey, and Illinois” delegations holding veto power over the rest of the convention. “When New York’s delegation makes the decision, the rest of the party suffers,” he wrote, before encouraging Roosevelt to allow the Western states a greater say in the nominating process. Warren Orr of Illinois similarly suspected foul play on the part of party bosses behind the two-thirds requirement.

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333 Several respondents, when they mentioned the two-thirds rule, wrote simply “Agreed to the elimination of the two-thirds rule,” or “Two-thirds rule needs eliminated.” See FDR Circular Letter Response, Claude Porter (Iowa) to Franklin Roosevelt, January 9, 1925 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; FDR Circular Letter Response, J.B. Wise (Kentucky) to Franklin Roosevelt, December 22, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; FDR Circular Letter Response, Thaddeus Adams (North Carolina) to Franklin Roosevelt, December 14, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, for example.

Gavin McNab, a respected Democratic leader from San Francisco, published his long narrative letter to the press. In it, he laid out a proposed solution to the two-thirds rule, bandied about in the latter days of the convention, wherein candidates could be eliminated from consideration after a set number of ballots. This measure would allow delegates to register their preference while eventually freeing delegates to support one of the major candidates. Through this process, the nominee would also eventually enjoy the two-thirds support needed to make the candidate look thoroughly endorsed, and without the fractious convention demonstrations. This plan was echoed by many later respondents, who likely read McNab’s response and agreed.335 F.W. Pike of Idaho mentioned the organizational deficiency with regard to the two-thirds rule, stating that the Democratic Party could not afford to nominate a well-known front-runner with the rule in place. “The Republican Party can nominate a ribbon clerk and get away with it, for their publicity fund skillfully manages to make even the village half-wit appear to be the man of the hour. The Democratic Party must nominate a man who has not only outstanding ability, but also the peculiar intangible quality of providing his own publicity...”336 The two-thirds rule made the challenge of nominating and electing a strong candidate harder.

**Distrusting the Bryan Brothers.**

Along with the two-thirds rule, one other issue found in responses to the 1924 Circular Letter was the exhaustion Democrats from every region felt for the Bryan brothers. The 1924 Democratic Convention was the last featuring the Great Commoner and a supposed moment of


triumph for his brother. Instead, the two brothers became an easy scapegoat for a party which increasingly viewed its three-time nominee as a relic of the past, and the nomination of his brother as an unforgivable sentimental mistake. Thirty-three respondents independently cited the Bryan brothers as a major problem, with twelve responses coming from Bryan’s supposed bastions of support, the South and the West.

    The distrust of the Bryan brothers was linked in large part to the regional divisions detailed later in this chapter. But the number of responses, from across the country, and across the regional divisions, showed a visceral exhaustion with William Jennings Bryan’s activities at the convention, and Charles’s nomination was often included as further proof of the deleterious effects the brothers had on the party. This was quite a change from Bryan’s reception at the conventions twenty years prior. In 1896, Bryan’s “Cross of Gold Speech” speech electrified the Democratic Convention in Chicago so thoroughly that the party endorsed the Nebraskan and his barely-disguised Populist platform. Four years later, the novelty had not worn off, and he was nominated again, armed with only an anti-expansionist sentiment. In 1908, he spoke out against Theodore Roosevelt’s appointing of William Howard Taft as his successor, and was again embraced as the nominee.

    Bryan’s nominations disguised the fact that, apart from his ability to electrify a Chautauqua or convention crowd, Democratic officials never embraced him as a respected party leader. Bryan believed differently, and he showed up at the subsequent conventions fully expecting to play king-maker, while privately nursing hope that he would be called once more into service as nominee. In 1912, his machinations worked perfectly: he threw his support to Woodrow Wilson early on, and was rewarded with a plum position he was clearly ill-prepared for, Secretary of State. Wilson never trusted him and deliberately carved him out of debates, and
Bryan resigned after two years in service. In 1920, he had hoped to play a larger role in deciding the eventual nominee, but contented himself in the floor fights over the Prohibition plank.

In 1924, the story was quite different. He arrived as a delegate for Florida and immediately prepared for battle. He loudly broadcast to the press his alignment with William McAdoo, an unsolicited endorsement. Throughout the convention, Bryan saw his reputation plummet as he experienced several humiliations. He was booed and hissed when he rose to talk, viewed by the New York galleries as an unintelligent hick from Nebraska and, worse, a relic from a previous era. Several times, he offered to serve as peacemaker, in the backdoor meetings over the plank and on the convention floor, and he was ignored and heckled at every turn. In his last opportunity to speak, late in the night as tensions were soaring, he was booed so thoroughly that he stood at the rostrum for minutes, gesturing for quiet, before finally conceding without speaking.

All of this made Charles Bryan’s fortunes all the more remarkable. While the delegates and gallery had thoroughly eliminated William Jennings Bryan from its proceedings, they reconvened the next day and made his brother the vice presidential nominee. It was clear the party could not afford to completely cast out the Western faction, but how Charles Bryan’s nomination provided any sort of boon remained a mystery. The convention dispersed while the questions hung in the air, and the election, months later, reinforced the resentments felt towards William Jennings and Charles Bryan.

Of course, most of the ire was aimed squarely at the elder Bryan, accusing him of poor leadership of the party. Democrats need to “get back to the principles of our party, build a platform to fit the needs of our country, and not the needs of Wm. Jennings Bryan,” Mrs. Charles Sharp of Alabama wrote. “No matter how sincere Mr. Bryan may be, he has not the confidence
of the people and he ought to be eliminated once and for all from the counsel of the party or from any influence whatever,” A. Bertig agreed. Andrew Conn Edwin from Georgia wrote that “Outside of a few fanatical followers, the country has no confidence in Mr. Bryan, or in the sincerity of his promises. So long as Mr. Bryan continues to dominate the Democratic platform at National Conventions, and persuades that committee to evade paramount issues... the Democratic Party will continue to face defeat nationally.”

Other respondents identified William Jennings Bryan as little more than a gifted orator and regretted ever supporting him. J.L Travers from Minnesota called Bryan “the high priest of cults” and a charlatan, capable of only verbal gymnastics. Bryan was entertaining on Chautauqua circuits, Porteus Burke of Louisiana wrote, but “Democracy should draw inspiration from Jefferson, Cleveland, and Wilson rather than the biblical lore and sophomoric essays on evolution” that Bryan offered. Donald Smith of Indiana was succinct, tracing his family’s Democratic heritage: “I started to vote when Bryan started to run for President and, living in a Republican locality, for years I never voted for a single individual who was elected to any office, so one defeat more or less is neither discouraging nor disheartening to me.” W.E. Ritter of Pennsylvania concurred: “I attended all the conventions that nominated Bryan. I was a delegate at Kansas City and supported him in all of his campaigns. He has however been the means of our disintegration. His convention work injures rather than helps.” H.G. Connor of North Carolina held back nothing: “(Bryan) has done more to destroy the Democratic Party from a national standpoint than all other causes combined. Favored as he has been by the party, he has at all

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times been the proponent of unsound economic ideas. [He was] the breeder of strife, the arouser of suspicion against honorable men, and, except when he was permitted to lead, a sulker in the tent. Until this man is hurled out of the Democratic Party, repudiated, nothing will be accomplished to make it a cohesive, militant force. His sophomoric and platitudinous outpours are disgusting to thoughtful people...”338

Several respondents referred to “Bryanism,” a catch-all term they allowed to stand in for all of the problems plaguing the party. Herbert Pell of New York wrote that the Democratic Party must rid itself of Bryanism, which he defined as “cheap and dishonest appeal to discontent... (Democrats) must cease to be the party making its appeal to failure and must return to principles which gave the party of Jefferson, Jackson, Tilden, and Cleveland... All of these great men appealed not to the coward anxious for government assistance or subsidy, but to the citizen proud of his independence and confident in his own strength and character, willing to accept responsibility.” Joseph Mekota of Iowa viewed Bryanism as the exact opposite, an imbalanced reverence for Bryan’s ideas from twenty-five years prior, and not enough attention being paid to young men and women. R.M. Fitzgerald of California worried about how Bryan’s growing crusade on evolution was affecting the party’s reputation. “Bryan is now engaged in a death struggle with the theory of evolution. True, he is probably pleasing the monkey because he is complimenting this animal by denying relationship. It must be remembered, however, that monkeys with tails do not vote.” Thomas Ivy of North Carolina wrote: “W.J. Bryan is dead and

has been dead so long that putrification is complete.” His words would be prescient just over half a year later, when Bryan died after the Scopes trial.339

Of course, some respondents laid the blame of Democratic defeat squarely at Charles Bryan’s feet, including Daniel Carrington Imboden of California, Joseph Mekota of Iowa (decrying the “Bryan dynasty”), and V.Y. Daliman of Illinois, who wrote that voters flocked to LaFollette because they were “frightened by Governor Bryan.” Philip Mathius of New Mexico also thought voters were fearful, but that they were fearful of voting for William Jennings a fourth time and ignorant of Charles. W.E. Ritter of Pennsylvania wrote that the platform was a mistake but Bryan’s nomination was a calamity. Harold Hale of Nevada pleaded with Roosevelt: “If there is any way that it can be done, without violating the law, for the love of heaven, get rid of the Bryan family!”340 With William Jennings’ death in the summer of 1925 and Charles’ quiet return to Nebraska politics, the prophetic pleas proved prescient.

**John W. Davis and the Nomination Debacle.**

Criticism of the candidates was not spared for the man at the top of the ticket, John W. Davis. The compromise candidate did not inspire much confidence or passion among the party loyal. But, for the most part, respondents who criticized Davis’ nomination faulted the process

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and a lack of support from the party leadership rather than the candidate himself. In total, 103 respondents made reference to the nominating procedure or Davis’ compromise candidacy, reasonably dispersed across the regions and with thirty-four coming from the Midwest.

Many respondents believed that Davis’s nomination was cursed before he was pronounced the Democratic candidate. George White of Ohio believed that the convention was a disaster: “Davis started out with a terrible handicap, which resulted in another disastrous routing.” John Williamson of Missouri wrote that Davis deserved no criticism, as he was abandoned by lifeless leadership and bad organization. Thomas Hyde of Wyoming wrote that Davis was hobbled by dissensions at the convention and had a lack of constructive policy to inspire the American voting public. W.E. Ritter from Pennsylvania supported Davis because “I will never vote for McAdoo and Smith can never be elected.”

Some respondents opined that Davis was a weak candidate without much chance, even under great circumstances. L.O. Marshall from Oregon wrote that Davis was far too willing to capitulate to unnamed foreign influences, despite his international affairs experience, an item the party would have been wise to vet before nominating him. Henry Rainey of Illinois and others thought that nominating Davis after denouncing Wall Street’s influence in politics was a giant contradiction. A.D. Metz from Ohio wrote that Davis speaking out against the Klan was “right in principle but poor politics,” jeopardizing Democratic support among Klan sympathizers in the Midwest; Swords Lee from Louisiana erroneously blamed Davis for the Klan even emerging as a political issue. Thomas Ivy of North Carolina wrote that Davis was “like a baseball player at bat,

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swing at every ball that is sent him, whether over the plate or not.” In taking a stance on the Klan, he continued, Davis “transcended the party’s platform” and delivered the election to Coolidge. Philip Mathius claimed that Davis’ statement made him appear as pro-Catholic rather than anti-Klan, and he did nothing to remedy the notion throughout his campaign. Others, like George Washington Williams from Maryland, insisted that Davis and future candidates be bound to the platform and forced to defend it vigorously, or they should be forced to decline the bid.342

Other respondents blamed the party leadership for abandoning John W. Davis when the delegates did not vote their way. P.J. Donohue of South Dakota, for instance, wrote that Davis was a strong, principled candidate undone by disloyalty from party leaders. Daniel Carrington Imboden of California was direct in blaming McAdoo’s departure for Europe after the convention, his failure to adequately campaign for the nominee like a loyal Democrat, and allowing fellow Californians to slip to LaFollette’s ranks. Edgar Brown of South Carolina wrote that Davis’ support was destroyed when the failed candidates and their factions lost interest in the nomination once they lost. Agnes Hodge from Minnesota spoke for those who suspected Tammany’s long grip on Democratic frontrunners, saying that the organization weakened him at the convention and then destroyed him in the general election (without offering any evidence).343


Of course, the criticism over presidential candidates in 1924 was not limited to John W. Davis’ nomination. A common complaint, usually from supporters of either front-runner, was that Al Smith and McAdoo would have been better national candidates, but that both men should have removed themselves from the proceedings when it was clear they would not win the nomination.\textsuperscript{344} Warren Orr from Illinois was critical of both men’s floor generals for not keeping their supporters in line, and allowing the proceedings to devolve, and Lee Eppinger from Kansas thought the “McAdoo machine and Smith machine” were out of control.\textsuperscript{345} Specific criticism included ideas that Al Smith was disloyal to the Democratic Party, from David Kemp of Indiana; had over-eager and off-putting supporters, from Donald Smith of Indiana; and was simply too regional of a candidate to be successful nationally, from M.A. Potter of Iowa. L.O. Marshall from Oregon wrote that the Smith supporters were all immigrants and had illegally swayed the vote from McAdoo: “this didn’t leave the best of taste with real Americans to know that their foreign born brothers were preferable in their own native land.”\textsuperscript{346}

McAdoo’s critics were even more angry, considering him disloyal for not campaigning for Davis or other Democratic candidates following his defeat, as articulated by Daniel


Carrington Imboden from California, and seconded by others. O.H. Dunbar from Maine called McAdoo selfish, and accused him of taking the position “that if McAdoo could not win the nomination, then no one could win the election;” George Dwinnell from Wisconsin echoed the sentiment. Thomas Ivy from North Carolina declared McAdoo “destructive,” and Samuel Stewart from Montana said he was not progressive enough for the changing party. One common comment about “boostering” (pushing one candidate over all others far in advance of the convention) labeled McAdoo as guilty of pushing his candidacy too early and then being intractable on the platform issues, as D.E. French from West Virginia and others conveyed. Walter Walker from Colorado and others thought that McAdoo and Smith should disavow any future presidential bid, having irreparably damaged the party with their antics in Madison Square Garden.347

The responses regarding Davis’ nomination reflect a lot of the confusion the Democratic delegates still harbored about the way the convention played out. John W. Davis was not as intimately known as William McAdoo and Al Smith, which served to deliver him from major blame after the party’s crushing defeat. But, it also reflected how deeply disadvantaged the convention proceedings made the Democratic nominee. Davis was suitable as a compromise nominee, a salve on the open wound, but without the passion of a large number of delegates.

Ideological Divisions.

One completely unforeseen complication to Franklin Roosevelt’s call for unity was the lack of consistency with what the party stood for, politically. The Democratic Party wrestled over the subsequent decade with how to balance an interest in broadening its base to keep the party politically viable with delivering on expectations the constituency increasingly demanded. There were positive and negative aspects: the fact that conservatives, progressives, and liberals all found a place within the Democratic Party meant that there was a broad base of support to build from. But, the responses to the Circular Letter also demonstrated that all three of these groups were angry at the way the party was responding to their interests. References to ideology were behind only those agreeing with the fundamentals and citing a lack of party leadership, with 151 respondents, dispersed across the regions. This also, notably, was the one issue to which Franklin Roosevelt did not know how to respond; he spent the next several years wrestling with how to define the Democratic Party apart from being the Republican’s opposition. This debate informed the way Franklin Roosevelt projected Democratic ideas and values when he began his bid for New York governor and the presidency.

As examined in Chapter I, part of the problem with identifying a coherent ideology within the Democratic Party in the 1920s was that the “conservative,” “liberal,” and “progressive” meant something different to everyone who used them. The party did little to remedy this, likely preferring that voters consider the Democrats their party, regardless of their understanding of the complex relationship between the government and its citizens. Loosely defined (for greater detail on Democrat’s struggle with ideology, see Chapter I), conservatives viewed the government with suspicion, were satisfied with the status quo, and believed that liberty should be defended; liberals tended to believe that liberty could be expanded and that the
government should be improving the lives of its citizens. Progressives tended to be single-issue oriented and targeted both parties, using social activism to motivate politicians to change laws.\textsuperscript{348} Throughout this section, when respondents mentioned the ideological lines and offered their criticism and advice, there were no clear examples offered.

Speaking for the confused masses was Missouri state senator Michael Kinney, who wrote “The question of whether the party shall be conservative or liberal and progressive. There can be no longer compromise on this matter. There is no middle ground. The Democratic population of the middle west, southwest, northwest, inner-mountain and Pacific coast states are liberal and progressive; the south as a whole is liberal but in spots conservative; Atlantic seaboard and eastern states by and large incline to conservatism on some issues, but as a whole are fairly liberal and progressive.” In his long, ten-page letter, Kinney provided an overview of the party’s problems, but his conflation of the ideological identities was repeated throughout other responses. For example, W.E. Ritter of Pennsylvania wrote “Party platforms should be liberal but conservative,” and Charles Richards of Nevada wrote the Democrats should be revamped on lines “of progressive but conservative liberality.”\textsuperscript{349}

One of the major accusations shared by respondents was that the Democrats should not try to be more conservative than the Republican Party, some offering that John W. Davis’ nomination continued this trend. Samuel Stewart from Montana, for instance, wrote: “If the Democratic Party is to accomplish anything in the way of leadership, it must get together an organization, and it must also get away from the notion that it can become conservative by

\textsuperscript{348} Craig, \textit{After Wilson}, 10-11; and Sarasohn, \textit{Party of Reform}, 166-170.

nominating conservative candidates and thereby succeed. Every time it nominates conservative candidates, it loses the progressives and fails to get the conservatives.” Preston Troy from Washington concurred, writing that the Republicans were ultra-conservative and the Democrats should not try to replicate their message.350

Conservative Democrats still had advocates, however. Nevada Congressman Charles Richards wrote that the “idea of conservatism must ever be potent because nothing else is compatible with our constitutional form of government.” A. Bertig from Arkansas wrote that the Democratic Party was “just as safe and conservative as the Republican Party,” before advocating that the Democrats needed to put businessmen’s suspicions to ease with their support of commerce and eliminate “rampaging” speeches that might cause unease. F.M. Scarlett from Georgia wrote that the Madison Square Garden debacle demonstrated to conservative voters that the Democrats were unable to govern themselves, while V.Y. Daliman from Illinois emphasized that conservative Democrats were rightly fearful of Charles Bryan.351

One of the chief problems with defining the liberal wing of the Democratic Party was a constant conflation of liberals with progressives. Notably, that distinction was not well-defined to the party members at the time, and any insurrection of the conservative order might have been viewed as liberal, progressive, or “radical,” but the terms were repeatedly interchanged. Colorado Governor William Sweet provided his rationale for the conflation, writing that the

350 FDR Circular Letter Response, Samuel Stewart to Franklin Roosevelt, December 20, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; and FDR Circular Letter Response, Preston Troy to Franklin Roosevelt, December 19, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. This sentiment was shared by several others; see: FDR Circular Letter Response, David Bork to Franklin Roosevelt, January 22, 1925 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

Democratic Party “is the party of progress and liberal thought...constructive in its program and
militant in advocating for principles.” Respondents like C.C. Dill and George Fishburne of
Washington viewed the liberal identity only in terms of opposing Republicans’ perceived
conservatism, without truly interrogating the defining features.352

Some respondents offered advice for embracing the liberal element in the party. O.H.
Dunbar from Maine wrote that the Democrats needed to become recognized as “the sufficient
and trusted” liberal party. Fellow Maine delegate William Pattangall agreed that the country
needed a “liberal party based on Democratic principles,” and James Vahey from Massachusetts
urged the party to consistently nominate a liberal to reflect the nation’s growing ideological split.
W.E. Ritter added that Democrats should be liberal but not demagogic. A.H. Ferguson from
Oklahoma assessed the situation bluntly: “Everybody admits that a strong liberal party is
desirable if not essential in order to secure good government under our form of party
government. I believe that a majority of the voters of the country are in favor of a liberal rather
than a conservative party. The trouble seems to be to get the voters to understand at election time
that ours is the Liberal Party.”353

By far the most abused term regarding ideology was “progressive,” with some
respondents thinking in regards to the Progressive movement, and others using the phrase to

352 FDR Circular Letter Response, William Sweet to Franklin Roosevelt, December 30, 1924 (FDR
Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; FDR Circular
Letter Response, C.C. Dill to Franklin Roosevelt, December 30, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter
Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; and FDR Circular Letter Response, George
Fishburne to Franklin Roosevelt, December 20, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses),
Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
353 FDR Circular Letter Response, O.H. Dunbar to Franklin Roosevelt, December 11, 1924 (FDR
Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; FDR Circular
Letter Response, William Pattangall to Franklin Roosevelt, December 24, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular
Vahey to Franklin Roosevelt, January 19, 1925 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses),
Roosevelt; and FDR Circular Letter Response, A.H. Ferguson to Franklin Roosevelt, January 2, 1925 (FDR
Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
simply reflect “forward-thinking” or “relevant.” There were, of course, those who viewed progressives as radicals. Homer Cummings of Connecticut thought the progressives were a disuniting force and Margaret Pike from Idaho cautioned that the party against “(any) more progressive or reactionary Democrats.” Contrarily, B.B. Anidon from Kansas advised the Democrats to become the progressive party and “allow the reactionaries to control the Republicans,” and V.Y. Daliman and Robert Bell of Minnesota thought that the Democrats suffered because the radicals of the party were won over by LaFollette’s messaging.

Oliver Good of Alabama not only viewed embracing progressivism as important to Democrats but also gave progressives much longer roots: “If the National Democratic Party is to gain control of the Federal Government it must be along soundly progressive lines such as are faithfully laid on the Constitution and sound business and economic principles and methods.” D.S. Ewing wrote that the party needed to find and nominate “unselfish, constructive, progressive leaders.” Norman Shafroth of Colorado advocated for embracing progressive values out of pure electoral pragmatism: “the West is progressive and dry, and no Democrat can carry it unless he is an outstanding progressive and known as such throughout the country.” His conflation of Prohibition with progressivism, and not reactionary or even conservative reflects the confusion many had about the political terminology.

354 For example, John Lusk of Alabama referred to “a broad, constructive, conservative, progressive, and nationwide program for the promotion of the great basic principles of freedom.” FDR Circular Letter Response, John Lusk to Franklin Roosevelt, January 6, 1925 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.


356 FDR Circular Letter Response, Oliver Good to Franklin Roosevelt, December 26, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; FDR Circular
Colorado Governor William Sweet offered perhaps the best vision of the party’s needs going forward, advocating a combination of the progressive element within the Democrats, and defined progressivism for Roosevelt: “My definition of a progressive is one who believes that the economic and material factors should be organized for the benefit of the human factors. The conservative believes that the human factors should be organized for the benefit of the economic and material factors. These two opposite ideas could well be taken as the plan and purpose of the Democratic party, as I conceive it, and the Republican party as it exists today.” Oswald West and J.D. Bledsoe from Oregon and Josiah Gitt from Pennsylvania all sensed the ambiguity of the progressive movement and encouraged Franklin Roosevelt and Democratic leadership to identify progressive principles and mold the party to reflect those values. Charles Bryan from Tennessee (not the Nebraska governor/vice presidential nominee) elaborated: “We permit people to call themselves Democratic in certain parts of the country who are not at all in accord with the general principles of the party”; without those principles (he did not specify which), the party was moorless and would follow the strongest breeze.357

The ambiguity of these loaded terms made them prime material to be confused and, as with the Bryan brothers, mistakenly scapegoated by self-interested and angry respondents. The terms themselves referred to behavior outside of political engagement, and that allowed for further confusion. For Democrats who wanted more action out of their party’s leadership or

voting base, decrying “conservatism” or comfort with the status quo was easy remedy. For Democrats who wanted to minimize disruptions to the political order, the changing climate and embracing of progressive ideas was fearsome.

The ideological division was not one that Franklin Roosevelt anticipated, and in the aftermath of the Circular Letter, he privately wrestled with defining the party’s unifying themes. This quest to give shape to the party’s appeal helped him focus his ideals and start scheming to expand the Democratic Party’s base and to garner consistent support from voters disenchanted with either party. In this way, the responses to the Circular Letter revealed an area of inquiry that Roosevelt had not anticipated and, in establishing his own political response, gave shape to the political career that defined Franklin Roosevelt’s second act.

**Regional Divisions: Southern Resentments and Resenting the South.**

Along with the division over ideological identification, the respondents to the Circular Letter were most divided over the growing regional divide. In particular, the Democratic Party was in grave danger of failing to unite the Southern Democrats, who it considered its base support, and the burgeoning support throughout the West and urban areas of the Northeast. The schism was evident to everyone who watched, read, or listened to the proceedings at Madison Square Garden in June, and by December, the hostilities between the delegates and party leaders had not dissipated. As with the party’s looming ideological identity crisis, Franklin Roosevelt now had the added concern of a sectional chasm, and bridging the regions’ complaints helped guide his electoral views for his career to come. There were 128 responses that contained reference to the regional divide, dispersed across the regions fairly evenly (the Midwest and South had 36 and 35, respectively.

By far the most acrimonious responses came from the South. While Western and
Northern/Northeast respondents were aware and worried about the growing chasm, there was a real anger and call for action from Southern voters. Southern Democrats felt that they were being left out of the process, especially at the convention. The South was reliably Democratic, to the point that the nickname “the Solid South” demonstrated both the faith the party leaders had in the region and the scant attention they paid to their needs and desires. This was unsatisfactory, and tensions brewing during this period would continue for decades until the party experienced a complete exodus of support in the South.

The convention rules meant that the Southern Democrats would be at a permanent disadvantage. The unit rule was their only hope: Democrats in states throughout the South had candidates drawn up far ahead of the convention and were made to stand behind the standard bearer; this process made it difficult for attractive secondary candidates to emerge from the South. The two-thirds rule meant that any Southern Democrat placed into nomination were frequently overruled by the other regions. It also meant that they maintained veto power, able to overrule the machinations of the Northern Democrats, but far too often, they felt, it was the Southern Democrats who negotiated and compromised for a candidate who they could abide.

Regional division had become contentious recently, especially as the conventions required longer balloting. Woodrow Wilson’s nomination in 1912 required 45 ballots and James Cox’s nomination in 1920 required 44 ballots, with the South comprising 22% of the total vote for the winning candidate. This was down considerably from the 40-41% of the total commanded by Bryan and Parker in 1896 and 1904, when the South was hugely instrumental in selecting the nominee. In 1924, the South responsible for 39% of Davis’ total support. Yet, he was a compromise candidate, and the South had become disenchanted with the art of compromise.358

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358 Rae, *Southern Democrats*, 37.
William Gibbs McAdoo had portrayed himself as a Southerner and, in fact, engendered a lot of support among the Southern delegates. His rejection, replacement with the compromise Davis, and the nomination of the appalling Charles Bryan made Southern Democrats feel increasingly left out of their party’s decision-making.

Southern Democrats in particular suffered with the two-thirds rule, where they were a powerful voting bloc, but not a majority. Too often, Democrats from the northern states were able to overrule the South (especially when they teamed with Western Democrats), while the South remained reliable for the general election. In some elections, the only support for Democratic candidates came from the South, and from 1876-1924, there were only rare Republican candidates who were able to make any kind of inroads in the region (and even then, it was only temporary). Hubert Bolen of Oklahoma summed it up best: “the (Northern) Democrats never elect Democrats as president, but dictate party platform and candidates as though they do!” Edgar Brown and Leroy Springs, both of South Carolina, voiced their disenchantment with their state being so important to the party in general elections, but being sidelined in the convention process.359

In their letters, the Southern Democrats clued Franklin Roosevelt in to their particular complaints, and some offered actual constructive criticism. J.B. Wise of Kentucky warned that the Democratic Party was in danger of becoming too sectionally focused, and felt that the convention process was sabotaging its national appeal. E.E. Lindsey of Georgia wrote that the South was shut out of the convention, in part due to Northern Democrats enjoying being

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superior. This led to the region and party being less than enchanted with the compromise candidates that emerged from the process. Nellie Somerville of Mississippi was creative, arguing that the Democrats should cede ground in the Solid South to allow Republicans to gain a foothold. “As long as there is a Solid South, there will be a Solid North,” and Democrats would not be competitive in national elections. Her solution would lead the Republicans to “stop catering to Negroes,” another shared goal among several delegates.360

Of course, some of the reactions of Southern Democrats were thick with racist ideology and an intractability of viewpoints (letters exclusively dealing with the Ku Klux Klan, for purposes of organization, will be discussed in the subsequent section, dealing exclusively with the Klan). It must be noted, also, that they thought nothing of writing to Roosevelt and signing their names. Francis Hunter of Georgia wrote: “But after all, we permit none down here except WHITE people to be Democrats, and it is a good rule. It is operated through our white primary system, and were it not for that, it would be unmanageable. The intermixing of the races would surely lead to disorder, riot, and bloodshed.” E.C. Parsons of Arkansas compared the convention process to “the old darky setting his traps to catch coons.” W.D. Wilson of Texas wrote proudly, “I am a member of the Ku Klux Klan,” before continuing to accuse Roosevelt: “At the New York convention, high classed Democrats, like you and John Davis, permitted the delegates from the eastern states, controlled by the Catholics and foreign-born voters, whose minds had been influenced and prejudiced by the press, to undertake to denounce the native born white Protestant

citizens because they had seen fit to join the Klan.”\textsuperscript{361} Clearly, some divisions and resentments were too deep to heal in a national party.

J.L. Andrews from Alabama provided insight into Southern perceptions of the other regions. “There is no Democratic Party in the West. The West will occasionally vote democratic as a protest against especially objectionable Republican policies,” but the party was not strong in the region. Democrats in the East, he continued, were strong supporters of personal liberty and “strongly arrayed against prohibition...As far as the conduct of the government in relation to business is concerned, the Eastern democrat is a conservative, and is bitterly opposed to the Bryan type of democracy which so much appeals to the West and to a large element in the South.” He warned the Democratic Party was “absolutely divided into a radical wing and a conservative wing in reference to government relations to the business of the country, and this majority stands for just about everything which the Eastern democrat opposes.”\textsuperscript{362} P.A. Stovall from Georgia was more succinct in denouncing Western leaders in the party, summing up the situation: “Western people have strange ideas and think strange thoughts and are too radical.”\textsuperscript{363}

Gavin McNab, W.U. Goodman, and Norman Shafroth, all from California, spoke up for the Western Democrats, claiming that the region was similarly disadvantaged. McNab claimed that Western Democrats were left out of decisions; no nominee, for president or vice president, from the party was born west of Nebraska, and there were no Democrats in congressional


\textsuperscript{363} FDR Circular Letter Response, P.A. Stovall to Franklin Roosevelt, January 3, 1925 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
leadership either. Goodman attributed the disparity to a lack of investment from the party and no publicity. Shafroth thought the West was being taken for granted and criticized leaders for paying any attention to New York: “It does seem unfair that (New York) should have so much power to defeat a Southern choice in Democratic Conventions when the West is the only section aside from the South that delivers votes when it does nominate a candidate.” He listed the previous candidates and credited Western ambivalence with their defeat. Colorado Governor William Sweet thought that there needed to be “a different spirit among the Democratic leaders of the East and Middle West.” 364

Donald Smith from Indiana saw the party solely in regional terms, dividing the party into three sections: radicals from the West and Northwest; New Englanders who “allowed the Klan to overshadow the convention”; and Southerners. Madge O’Neill from Iowa wrote, as several others did, about uniting the South and West to overcome the urban element and New York power. Hugh Wall and Robert Bell, both from Minnesota, agreed. Bell wrote “Our only hope is to unite the West with the South and border states, the agricultural states against the manufacturing Northeast.” J.B. Wise from Kentucky warned against the “organized minority in the South and West attempting to rule or ruin,” a phrase repeated throughout.365

The Northeastern respondents, by and large, stayed away from pinning the results on a regional division: it is entirely conceivable that the delegates and leaders in cities in the

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Northeast did not see the party divided in this manner. As the Southern and Western respondents detailed, the process had privileged the decision-makers of the East, even if they were not successful in sending candidates to the White House or making much momentum in Congress. The respondents from New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts identified individual issues and blunders at the convention as being responsible for the current problems. One region not acknowledging or understanding what two others view as essentially problematic was a glaring problem for a party hoping to move forward electorally.\(^\text{366}\)

Of course, the regional division also drew in stark relief the other tensions (ideology, convention rules, and issues like the Klan) which separated Democrats in 1924. Roosevelt clearly understood and sympathized with Southern concerns of being disadvantaged in the convention process, but he was also critical of the Klan’s liability in allowing the Democratic Party to grow and appeal to more voters. His ability to respond to the region would be the hallmark of his electoral and governing strategy once he ran for and won the presidency.

**The Major Divisive Issues of the 1920s.**

Unsurprisingly, the respondents to the Circular Letter also weighed in on the Democratic Party’s handling of the major divisive issues of the 1920s. As detailed in Chapter I, the major issues cited by respondents were the protective tariff; American entry into the League of Nations; prohibition enforcement; and the Ku Klux Klan. Obviously, the respondents’ region often played into the way they viewed the issues, and that factored into how important the issues were in determining the Democratic Party’s fate. With the tariff, the League of Nations, and prohibition, respondents advocated for better definition of the party’s policy; with the Klan, the respondents advocated for better definition of the party’s policy; with the Klan, the respondents advocated for better definition of the party’s policy.

\(^{366}\) One exception was John Matthews from New Jersey, who claimed that Southern Democrats were “more anti-Negro, anti-Jew, and anti-Catholic than democratic”; FDR Circular Letter Response, John Matthews to Franklin Roosevelt, December 12, 1924 (FDR Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
clearly vented on not just the organization and the Democratic Party’s relationship with the Klan, but on how the debate dominated the coverage of the convention and revealed the divisions in stark relief. Figuring out how to approach these issues would be of paramount importance for a party trying to find its footing following the electoral defeat, and Franklin Roosevelt’s particular pacification would be challenged.

*The Protective Tariff.*

Modern scholars may doubt the importance of the protective tariff as a major political issue, even into the 1920s, but the results of the Circular Letter demonstrate that the letter was on the mind of several respondents, twenty-two in total. According to them, the Democratic Party’s wavering on the tariff was one of the main reasons that the party was being defeated regularly. For Southerners and farmers, the tariff was a paramount concern, and Republicans were settled on the topic. The Democratic Party could not afford to be wrong about the protective tariff if they hoped to win in future elections, and to keep key constituencies satisfied.

At the convention, the platform committee drafted a largely reactionary plank regarding the tariff. Most of the language was directed at opposing Republican measures, without sufficiently providing a stark example of how the Democratic proposal would be different. “We denounce the Republican tariff laws which are written in great part in aid of monopolies and thus prevent the reasonable exchange of commodities which would enable foreign countries to buy our surplus agricultural and manufactured products with resultant benefit to the toilers and producers of America...We declare our party’s position to be in favor of a tax on commodities entering the customs houses that will promote effective competition, protect against monopoly and at the same time produce a fair revenue to support the Government.” The platform committee also included language that was clearly designed to prey on farmers’ insecurities, but
again, offered little in the way of substantive proposals. It was evident why there would be lingering confusion for the delegates and leaders in the aftermath of the election.367

Several Southerners took the Circular Letter as an opportunity to educate Democratic leadership on the importance of the protective tariff. Oliver Good from Alabama provided substantive information on the history of the tariff and the results of recent administrations’ tampering with the measure of concern to farmers, particularly in the South. Griffin Hawkins from Louisiana tied the party’s regional problems to the tariff issue, claiming that the Southern Democrats needed to pay attention to the plight of farmers.368

Andrew Conn Edwin from Georgia thought the issue was important for Democrats, not just because of the implications for farmers or for platform consistency, but because it was one of the few issues that had real differentiation between the Republicans and Democrats. Henry Rainey from Illinois similarly observed that the Republicans were actually as inconsistent, but Democrats could not take advantage when the question was not addressed sufficiently. A.B. Denison from Ohio used the protective tariff as an example of where the Democratic Party was failing in conveying its message properly. By not articulating what “protective” tariffs were, Denison wrote, Democrats were ceding ground to Republicans over a controversial issue (Denison suggested referring to “robber” tariffs from then on). Caroline Ruutz-Rees from Connecticut and P.H. Quinn from Rhode Island wrote that the Democratic Party needed to keep the tariff away from political conversations altogether.369

James Nugent from New Jersey placed the Democratic loss squarely on the party’s tariff problem. He wrote that the Democrats had allowed the Republicans to control the narrative regarding the party’s attitudes towards business, making Democrats look unstable and dangerous to business. “The manufacturer in this vicinity who grows rich under the present robber tariff impresses his working men and women with the idea that if the Democratic Party is restored to power that his business and their work will cease,” Nugent wrote. “It seems to be impossible to eradicate this feeling.”

*The League of Nations.*

As with the protective tariff, the League of Nations debate within the Democratic Party seemed a settled issue in 1924. In 1920, the issue had been a raging topic; had Franklin Roosevelt solicited the responses from delegates then, the vast majority would have blamed James Cox’s endorsement of Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations for the Democrats’ crushing defeat. Four years later, the fact that League entry was still a subject of political speculation for Wilson’s party was surprising, but the Democratic Party clearly had not settled many problems satisfactorily. Twenty-two responses referenced the League of Nations as a source of controversy for the Democratic Party in 1924, meaning that the issue still needed resolution.

At the convention, the platform committee took the curious position of re-explaining the League of Nations, as though anyone in attendance would be unfamiliar with the League and its purpose. Part of its recounting of the League’s formation, however, was tied directly to the party: “Under Democratic leadership a practical plan was devised under which fifty-four nations are

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now operating...” and “the Democratic Party renews its declaration of confidence in the ideal of world peace.” In stark terms, the committee, without the consent of any of the major candidates for president, reaffirmed the commitment of the party: “the Democratic Party declares that it will be the purpose of the next Administration to do all in its power to secure for our country the moral leadership in the family of nations which has been so clearly marked out for it. There is no substitute for the League of Nations as an agency working for peace.” The plank concluded with an opportunity for supporters to dominate the proceedings by pressing for a voice vote on the measure.371

The League was endorsed by acclamation as part of the official platform, but John W. Davis felt no particular closeness to the issue. He ridiculed Republicans for allowing Harding to claim that he would work towards American participation and then abandoned the issue, but he only mentioned the League sporadically.372 It was clear the issue, which inspired much less passion than in 1920, was still something of an albatross around the Democratic politicians’ necks, particularly those who did not want to reject Woodrow Wilson’s legacy project. Tellingly, however, William McAdoo all but ignored the issue.

By far, the most common refrain on the topic was that the Democratic Party was missing an opportunity by refusing to take a concrete stand on the issue, once and for all. R.M. Fitzgerald from California called the party’s leadership “cowardly and shifty” for not taking a decisive stance at the convention; Jessie Daniel Ames from Texas echoed the “cowardly” claim. Gavin McNab, also from California, continued railing against the party for a perceived anti-Western slight, saying that Wilson never bothered to gauge the reaction of Western Democrats (failing to

372 John W. Davis Speech, “Difference Between a Republican and a Democrat,” undated (Memoranda and Research; Group 170, Box 150), John W. Davis Collection: Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut.
mention that Wilson had a stroke on his way to the West Coast and never recovered). After the 1920 election and Wilson’s replacement as party leader, McNab wrote, the party went into bankruptcy and had not recovered. 373

Several respondents wrote that the party should drop the issue altogether. Francis Hunter from Georgia warned against foreign organizations and entanglements, including the World Court and League of Nations. Hugh Wall from Minnesota feared that the League issue would keep defeating the Democratic Party, as he thought it was unpopular and increasingly indefensible. Ray Farmington, also from Minnesota, agreed: the debate over League entry had the potential to make the Republicans look xenophobic, but instead divided the Democrats.

James McMahan from Ohio claimed that the party had failed in providing enough information for voters to make an informed decision, and the moment where the League could have been accepted had long passed. Warren Orr from Illinois and Aura Lawther from Iowa suspected the party leadership of injecting the issue into convention proceedings solely to cause rancor. George Mahan from Missouri called the League a losing issue and offered that the Democrats needed to move forward instead of continually advocating for something that voters had repeatedly rejected. 374

Of course, several respondents still felt some duty in seeing the League issue through, either out of deference to Woodrow Wilson or because they believed in its utility. H.B.

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Bracewell from Iowa and several others wrote about the importance of supporting Woodrow Wilson’s plan for international cooperation. Senator William Cabell Bruce from Maryland wrote that the Democrats “should unreservedly renew its allegiance to the League of Nations,” either as it was originally proposed or with some alterations to make it safe as a political issue; abandoning the issue was not an option. J.W. McCullough, also from Maryland, agreed that the party should defend the League, pointing to the success the organization had, claiming that the organization would no longer be a political liability.\(^{375}\)

That the League of Nations had become such a political liability was, of course, owed to Woodrow Wilson making the issue so contentious and partisan. No Democrat had made League entry a major political point, and now, with Wilson dead, the party had no reason to continue to tie itself to the unpopular issue.

**Prohibition Enforcement.**

As with the League of Nations, the issue of Prohibition enforcement could have been a moot issue. The issue had been handled well before the 1920 presidential election, and the most either party could do was pledge themselves to loyally defend the Constitution and its amendments. In 1924, as in 1920, the reason this was a common response to the Circular Letter (cited in twenty-one responses) was not delegates and leaders debating the merits of the amendment. Rather, they were focused on how vigorously the party would pledge itself to enforcing the amendment, and whether or not the party had a weakness on this matter. Al Smith was a well-known opponent of prohibition, and his attempt at the convention to explain his

enforcement as governor versus his personal opposition to the law was perhaps too nuanced for voters and delegates who craved concrete positions.

In one of the shortest platform planks, the platform committee proposed only two lines: “The Republican administration has failed to enforce the Prohibition Law; it is guilty of trafficking in liquor permit, and has become the protector of violators of this law. The Democratic Party pledges itself to respect and enforce the Constitution and all laws.” There were no accompanying anecdotes or evidence of the Republican’s dereliction, and the committee was clearly sensitive to the vulnerabilities some candidates (namely Al Smith) would have on this issue. But, the party notably moved from any kind of justification or explanation and focused squarely on the issue of enforcement, a much more defensible position.376

Once again, regional suspicions played a large role in reactions to the prohibition enforcement issue. Support for prohibition had been prevalent among rural voters nationwide, but Southerners in particular were among the most ardent supporters. J.L. Andrews of Alabama enumerated the perceived disparity among Southern and Eastern support, writing: “The democrats in the East are generally those who believe strongly in personal liberty, as that personal liberty relates to individual conduct. The Eastern democrat is strongly arrayed against prohibition, and rather believes in a wide open town and a wide open state, and is impatient of legal restraints as those restraints relate to personal conduct... The South is democratic on account of long cherished sentiment, but in its real present day political views, it is rabidly in favor of prohibition; it is absolutely divided into a radical wing and a conservative wing in reference to government relations to business of the country, and this majority stands for just about everything which the Eastern democrat opposes.”377

376 “Law Enforcement,” Democratic Campaign Book for 1924, 35.
Edward Brown from Minnesota spoke for several rural delegates who castigated Al
Smith, and Roosevelt’s avowed support of the candidate. “I have been a warm admirer of yours
for some years,” Brown wrote. “My admiration received a severe jolt last June when you became
speaker for Governor Smith and joined with the other forces which in the Democratic convention
destroyed what seemed to be the opportunity of a generation for putting the Democratic party on
its feet and uniting in a great success the really democratic voters of the country, who believe in
honest and decent government, and the abrogation of special privilege. The great majority of the
voters of the country believe in these principles, but they also believe in a safe and a decent
government based upon the Constitution including the eighteenth amendment. Governor Smith
and his cohorts in the convention catering to the enemies of prohibition made Democratic
success impossible.”378

The responses that mentioned prohibition all shared one viewpoint: eliminating
prohibition as a convention issue, or at least not repeatedly fighting the same battles as before.
Chester Horn from Colorado thought that using a settled issue like prohibition as a rubric in
voting for or against nominees in 1924 was “ridiculous.” Joseph Mekota from Iowa was
outspoken against prohibition still: “We must not be afraid to call...the prohibition law a failure
and a menace.” Robert Bell from Minnesota and W.D. Wilson from Texas saw the prohibition
fight solely as a way to divide the party. J.K. Hogan from Iowa wrote “the sooner we get away
from prohibition, the better it is for the Democrat Party.” Josiah Gitt from Pennsylvania wrote
that the Democrats should divorce [themselves] from any association with the wets, as
explaining the nuance of the party’s position was a losing proposition.379

378 FDR Circular Letter Response, Edward Brown to Franklin Roosevelt, March 9, 1925 (FDR
Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
379 FDR Circular Letter Response, Chester Horn to Franklin Roosevelt, December 29, 1924 (FDR
Correspondence, 1924 Circular Letter Responses), Franklin Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; FDR Circular
Few Democrats were interested in continually bringing up the prohibition enforcement issue, as there was not a winning angle that the party could possibly employ. Even with the matter supposedly solved four years previously, Democrats were still divided and anxious over the amendment and its protection.

**The Ku Klux Klan and Religious Freedom.**

The most pressing issue on the minds of many of the respondents to the 1924 Circular Letter was the Ku Klux Klan debacle at Madison Square Garden. Not surprisingly, there was truly no precedent for dealing with an organization like this within the Democratic Party. For leaders and delegates, the Klan had emerged from the fringes of society to take a place of prominence in the political sphere, and the debate over how to deal with the Klan had hijacked the convention proceedings. Truthfully, as detailed in Chapter III, this was in large part due to political maneuvering, allowing the Klan debate to stand as proxy for the larger Smith vs. McAdoo decision, but the results were cataclysmic. No one was prepared for the damage the Klan debate wrought, and certainly not the result of tarring the Democratic Party as sympathetic to the Klan when the measure failed. In total, fifty-one responses mentioned the Klan, with twenty coming from the Midwest and fifteen from the South, the two regions where the Klan’s influence was the most alarming.

The platform committee’s milquetoast substitute for the denunciation of the Klan simply reaffirmed the Constitution’s protection of free speech, press, and religion. The committee inserted that “no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office of public trust under the United States.” The measure closed with “We insist at all times upon obedience to

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the orderly processes of the law and deplore and condemn any effort to arouse religious or racial
dissension.” In contrast, the Republicans offered on their platform “The Republican Party
reaffirms its unyielding devotion to the Constitution and to the guaranties of civil, political and
religious liberty therein contained.” The responses reflected disgust with the orderliness with
which Republicans dispatched with the issue, furor over the debate over whether to denounce the
Klan by name, and some genuine concern over the Klan’s level of power in the party.

Most respondents advocated keeping the Klan out of convention proceedings, but their
reasoning was different. Wirt Bowman from Arizona, for instance, wrote that Klan and religion
should not have been broached in the convention, because: “Klansmen, Catholics and
Protestants, if citizens of the United States are all voters, some belong to one party and some to
another, why antagonize them in a convention and lose their votes in the election?” George
Washington Williams from Maryland conflated the Klan with the Knights of Columbus and
claimed the party was playing favorites in not condemning the Knights as well. Thomas Ivy from
North Carolina similarly believed that the true division was between Catholics and the Klan, and
with the convention debate, the Democrats were taking sides. John West from Georgia felt that
his fellow delegates were misrepresented in the press, stating that the delegation would have
voted against the Klan. West was also highly critical of Forney Johnson’s nominating speech for
Oscar Underwood, writing that he was self-serving by interjecting the divisive issue into the
convention. Earl D. Bloom from Ohio claimed that the Klan was not a national issue until
Democrats made it one. Henry Rainey from Illinois decried the measure as unexpectedly
exposing the Democratic Party as somehow sympathetic to the Klan; E.J. Feuling and William
Keefe, both from Iowa, blamed Republicans for setting the Klan debate as a trap. James

Clements from Delaware wrote that the party should not meddle in matters on religion or secret societies. Robert Bell argued for taking a lesson from the Republicans and simply ignoring the subject altogether, as he claimed it was not a political issue and served only to divide the party.  

Some respondents were still angry and outspoken in their denunciation of the Klan. Senator William Pattangall from Maine warned that the party’s brand was damaged in regions, like Maine, where the Klan was not a force. Henry Wilson from Pennsylvania viewed the struggle as one over intolerance, and suggested that the party would be ruined if there was no successful intervention. Daniel Carrington Imboden from California wrote “if there are religious discussions, the Democratic Party should condemn the Ku Klux Klan and all other obnoxious, un-American organizations,” claiming large number of progressive Democrats left the party because of its cowardice. Similarly, Charles M. Bryan from Tennessee wrote that the Klan debate exposed a fundamental weakness in the party; the party “should have spoken unhesitatingly and without reserve,” and failing to do so would have long-term consequences.

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Some of the reactions of Southern Democrats were unabashed with racist ideology and an intractability of viewpoints. Francis Hunter from Georgia wrote: “But after all, we permit none down here except WHITE people to be Democrats, and it is a good rule. It is operated through our white primary system, and were it not for that, it would be unmanageable. The intermixing of the races would surely lead to disorder, riot, and bloodshed.” George Washington Williams from Maryland wrote “If you are going to base your future efforts on the rotten element in New York plus the votes of Negroes who are disgruntled with the Republican Party, you are doomed, and will deserve it.” Porteus Burke from Louisiana wrote that the Klan issue made Democrats seem overly emotional. “Republicans would cease coddling the negro if Democrats could eliminate the negro as a political asset.” E.C. Parsons from Arkansas thought nothing of comparing the convention process to “the old darky setting his traps to catch coons.” W.D. Wilson from Texas wrote proudly, “I am a member of the Ku Klux Klan,” before continuing to accuse Roosevelt: “and am neither anti-Catholic, anti-Jew, nor anti-Negro. I am opposed to mob law.” He repeated that there was nothing subversive about the Klan and that he was opposed to secret and racial organizations.383 Clearly, some divisions and resentments were confusing even to the stalwart adherents.

It was clear that nerves were still raw from the floor fight at the convention. Organizationally, the responses indicated that there was very little positive that emerged from the Klan debate, but going forward, the party had to figure out how it would embrace the question of religious freedom. Lee Eppinger from Kansas wrote, perhaps simplistically, that the party should

be assembled “not as Klan or anti-Klan, Jew or Gentile, Catholic or Protestant, but as honest-to-goodness Democrats with a love for country.”

**Other Responses.**

There were, of course, other responses to the Circular Letter. Most took the task of meting out the problems of the party very seriously, but others seemed to enjoy the opportunity to vent. S.F. Spohn from Indiana wrote with a flourish: “Can we find a Moses? One who is an architect as well as a mosaic painter? Can we find a Joan of Arc? One who can turn the tide of women’s electorate from the pell-mell momentum towards the opposition, to the followers of the tenets of the Democratic party?” (Roosevelt would re-appropriate the Moses line for his *Jefferson and Hamilton* book review, detailed in Chapter V). Others took a comedic approach. Aura Lawther from Iowa shared a vivid description: the Democratic Party “is like a description I recently read of a middle aged man, ‘It is made up of prejudices and waste products.’”

W.E. Gunn of Middlesboro, Kentucky, mailed the *Louisville Post* to provide his satirical take on the Democratic Party’s problems. The letter was sent in by several respondents and likely shared with others. The suggestions:

“First—Before another national convention is held, change the two-thirds rule so what three-fourths or nineteenths will be necessary to nominate and make it that much more difficult for a majority to have its way.

Second—Hold the Democratic national convention either in Maine or Vermont.

Third—Make the Alabama primary law apply everywhere so that no state delegation may vote for anyone except a favorite son. This will give us forty-eight favorite son candidates at the next convention. Ten or twelve are too few.

Fourth—Require the convention before proceeding to discuss issues pertaining to the national government, to take up the subjects of Klanism, Evolution, Bobbed Hair, and the Hoop Skirt. If a man is wrong on any of these questions, do not let him vote the Democratic ticket.

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Fifth—Nominate no man until he has his aspirations approved by all former candidates for president.
Sixth—Ask the Republicans whom to nominate on the Democratic ticket. They are always ready to give such advice.”386

Several delegates, like Warren Orr from Illinois, James Orr from Kansas, and Madge O’Neill from Iowa, wrote that New York City should never be allowed to host a convention again, blaming either the location or its citizens for the June debacle. Thomas Mott Osborne from New York claimed that the proceedings had devolved at the convention: “It is an insult to the intelligence of the American people to attempt to decide such difficult questions in the midst of a howling mob of bystanders. Claude Cook of Texas wrote: “I fear the painful demonstrations and insults pictured before the eyes of duly elected representatives of every Democratic state during the convention in New York, there further intensified by the words and manner of conducting the campaign of the nominee has caused the death of the Democratic Party. The people who have as their inheritance such history as Bunker Hill, Valley Forge, and Plymouth Rock, and who love the ideals of George Washington and Robert E. Lee can never turn their country over to the element who seem to control the ideas of the Democratic Party at this time.”387

Some (like Senator William Pattangall from Maine, Thomas Maloney from Iowa, Walter Walker from Colorado, and Claude Porter from Iowa) were more proactive in offering a suggestion of a conference of delegates and party leaders, to sort the problems out face-to-face

Roosevelt would actually act on this). Hugh Wall from Minnesota suggested eliminating any discussion of “anything that might foster tension and prejudice,” before listing all of the issues discussed at the convention. Edgar Brown from South Carolina wrote that the problem was the Democrats struggling for an identity: “The Democratic Party should not be made the party of the South, the labor party, the Ku Klux Party, the Catholic Party, the Sixteen-to-One Party, or any other party; we should have a united, sound, progressive party representing the highest ideas of democracy.”

One common response was unadultered flattery of Franklin Roosevelt and his performance at the convention. Albert Woods from Georgia wrote that the party needed “more Franklin Roosevelts and need to be done with William Jennings Bryans.” J.K. Hogan from Iowa wrote: “A good many people asked me who I thought the outstanding people were at the convention and I told them every time it was you and Newton Baker. You kind of people are made out of the right kind of clay to line the matters up and do the sensible thing.” B.L. Jefferson from Colorado wrote “You ought to be praised for your unrelenting perseverance in the cause of Democracy. I sincerely hope that representative Democrats from the entire country will join in giving worthy consideration to your valued letter and will be able to offer such suggestions as will enable such patriotic Democrats as you to formulate a substantial plan for the ultimate success of the party, clothed with majestic power, finding everywhere a happy echo in the hearts of the people.”

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Of course, some of the respondents focused on Roosevelt’s disability and the uncertainty of his future. V.Y. Daliman from Illinois wrote “You were an inspiration to the party and I am satisfied you will be a potential factor in the party’s future activities.” Roland Sawyer from Massachusetts wrote: “You have the personality...I don’t know that the condition of your health would allow you to have the energy.” Similarly, A.E. Helmick from Minnesota wrote: “Let me express the joy we feel in hearing of the gradual restoration of your old time physical self. We have sympathized in your courageous battle and hope before long, if it has not already come to pass, that you may be as sound in body as you are alert and vigorous of mind.” Charles Brough from Arkansas wrote: “Like the overwhelming majority of the delegates...I became a very ardent admirer of yours, and had your physical condition permitted, you would have been the compromise candidate.” Lee Eppinger (like S.F Spohn before) made reference to Moses when complimenting Roosevelt: “(I) have always admired you (and) would conscientiously follow you. We sure need a Moses...”

Some delegates were highly critical of Roosevelt. George Washington Williams from Maryland wrote: “I am rather inclined to think that you contributed, as much as any other person, to the disruption of the party by, indirectly at least, representing the minority element of the party in your management of the Smith campaign, which you knew could result in nothing but a fiasco, as you certainly knew that Smith had no more chance of being nominated than a citizen of

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Buncombe.” John Backus from Massachusetts wrote to Roosevelt: “I find my thought disturbed by your language. The Democratic Party is not a militant organization and it never will be in the sense that you use the term and again, there are no acknowledged leaders, and it is not true that the party is weaker nationally than locally, and if your letter invites a discussion of the material elements of the party, let me say that materially, the party is surviving on its lung power and in the past campaign, suffered from pleuro pneumonia.” 391

Finally, some responses were simply sanguine, especially when viewed against the entire assortment. John Stevenson from Oregon wrote that the Klan and other convention tensions would fade and “the Lord and the Republican Party, each working in a different direction, will give us an issue four years hence.” Henry Rainey from Illinois wrote that the election results were not as bad as they could have been, considering everything that had taken place. Robert Larkin from Illinois wrote “I never have and do not now think there is anything wrong with the Democratic Party,” before adding that they should return to “good old Democratic principles.” 392

Franklin Roosevelt received the vast majority of the responses between December 1924 and February 1925, and then began the real work of reforming the party (detailed in Chapter V). The Circular Letter was not just a means to an end, though, and not important only for leading to Roosevelt’s political renaissance, though that is one very important result. The other important result is the rare opportunity to take stock of a major political party and the concerns and complaints of the delegates and party leaders at this pivotal moment. The fact that it was

Franklin Roosevelt who orchestrated the pulse-taking is, of course, historically important, and definitely provides a through line to understanding his political machinations during this difficult period in his life and career. But, the Democratic Party was also at a crossroads, and understanding and contextualizing the responses, especially following the calamitous convention. The responses to the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter of 1924 provide an understanding of a vital organization in crisis, from the delegates and leaders who felt closest to the issue. While not a complete “bottom-up approach,” the respondents clearly viewed themselves as a vital bridge between the party’s bureaucracy and the nameless, faceless voters who, they hoped, supported their decision-making. Finally, if the 1924 Democratic Convention represented a turning point for the Democratic Party and Franklin Roosevelt, the Circular Letter and the Circular Letter responses were the first steps in a process that would bring both the Democratic Party and Franklin Roosevelt to triumph in 1932.
CHAPTER V. “IS THERE A JEFFERSON ON THE HORIZON?” FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT Responds

Franklin Roosevelt reasserted himself as a major figure in the Democratic Party in 1924, with his Circular Letter providing the bureaucratic complement to his stellar performance at the Democratic Convention that summer. In the Circular Letter, Roosevelt was able to start setting the tone for a consensus among disenchanted Democratic leaders and delegates. In the months and years that followed, Roosevelt would utilize the responses to inform his relationship with his party and voters, and reformed the Democratic Party for future electoral success. His election as president in 1932 represented the culmination of all of these efforts, with his further party reformations as president solidifying his vision for the Democratic Party as his political tool.

This chapter examines the various reactions to the contents of the Circular Letter responses: Roosevelt’s responses to Democratic Party delegates and leaders’ correspondence; Roosevelt’s failed efforts to form a regular conference of Democratic leaders in April 1925; Roosevelt’s successful efforts to provide an ideological identity for the party, latching onto Thomas Jefferson’s legacy; alterations to the party’s policies, as he first proposed in the Circular Letter; and the impact of the letter on Roosevelt’s candidacy as governor of New York and as President. Franklin Roosevelt’s 1932 presidential election served as the culmination of his efforts as a party leader, a process that began with his re-entry at the 1924 Democratic Convention and was solidified with his Circular Letter. In fact, Roosevelt’s acceptance speech at the 1932 Democratic Convention demonstrated all of the lessons Franklin Roosevelt learned about his party and his leadership in the aftermath of his 1924 Circular Letter.

As detailed in Chapter IV, historians overlook the impact of the Circular Letter in understanding Franklin Roosevelt during this period. Even those historians, like Frank Freidel
and Arthur Schlessinger, Jr., who devoted large scholarly inquiries to Roosevelt’s interregnum, between his polio attack and triumph as governor and president, minimize the effort Roosevelt devoted, his motivations to stay relevant, or the leadership he provided during this fallow period for Democrats. Similarly, the Circular Letter is not referenced in discussing Roosevelt’s later efforts for party unity, providing party ideology, or tailoring his political campaigns to meet the disparate electorate. This chapter will correct that narrative, demonstrating how the Circular Letter responses informed Franklin Roosevelt’s party reformation and his own political identity as he built the New Deal Democrat electoral juggernaut.

Additionally, I argue that after the Circular Letter, Roosevelt revealed his true political prowess. After the Letter, Franklin Roosevelt gradually abandoned the cautious approach he had perfected as a rising politician, and he could no longer afford to be the obsequious party operator that he had portrayed (most notably in Madison Square Garden). This chapter will identify how Franklin Roosevelt realized what made him a Democrat, and what principles and policies would help unite fellow Democrats and ensure his consistent electoral success.

**Franklin Roosevelt’s Response to the Circular Letter**

Between December 1924 and March 1925, Franklin Roosevelt was inundated with the responses from Democrats across the country. While each of the responses to his letter was filed in his office, he chose to respond to some of the letters personally, continuing the conversation he started. There was no clear rationale for which responses he chose to confront, or if there were additional messages that were not archived (though that seems very unlikely, given how fastidious his correspondence system was). His replies to Circular Letter responses provide an opportunity to chart in real time how Roosevelt reacted to the pointed criticism and flattery the letter engendered.
One week after he sent his Circular Letter, he responded to P.W. Reeves, from Washington, D.C., who wrote before the election was conducted and encouraged Franklin to consider a run for the presidency in 1928. Roosevelt used a measured tone, which would be replicated throughout all of the responses he sent to Circular Letter respondents. Roosevelt tread a fine line in these responses: he clearly enjoyed the credit and praise for his efforts while also trying to train focus on the letter-writing as a selfless, party-focused act. “Of course,” he wrote to Reeves, “it is an honor to be considered a presidential possibility and I appreciate your good words very much... Our party is obviously in need of getting back to the great essential things which distinguish a Democrat from a Republican and to unite on these real issues in an appeal to the country. We have allowed this man and that man to preach in the name of Democracy and to claim as a Democratic doctrine this thing or that thing which is after all only a secondary issue... Our next candidate will be, I hope, the man who during the next four years has been most unselfishly and with least thought of personal advantage devoted himself to the task of bringing the party back to a realization of what are the real things that make it better to be a Democrat than to be of some other political faith. The man who succeeds in uniting all of our present discontented elements in a common creed to which all can subscribe and which will attract the thoughtful voter all over the country. There is work to be done and I am going to try to do my part.”

Clearly, Roosevelt was describing himself, but without any obligation to the party or break with his supposed selfless interest in party unity.

Roosevelt returned to his party unity line in his reply to John Smith from Georgia in February. Roosevelt wrote that he was starting to process “hundreds of very interesting replies that I have received,” and started discussing his plans for a conference of Democratic leaders.

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“We need to go back to basic principles, to stop talking about candidates for 1928 and through better organization to make an appeal to the country as a whole and not to any one section. If we do this a good many millions who voted the Republican ticket this year will be Democrats next.”

It was a simplistic appeal to a Southern delegate, without any substantive details, but with a substantial upside to Roosevelt and some of the correspondents: “Some so-called Democrats will have the opportunity of becoming definitely and finally, Republicans.”

This was Roosevelt’s first advocacy of purging behavior, ridding the party of non-compliant or uncertain Democrats, in the name of party strength.

Weeks later, Roosevelt transitioned into a more detail-oriented response with Clem Shaver, the former chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Roosevelt dictated his vision for membership to his party-leadership committee, hand-picking who he wanted to be included. The committee should “…not have more than 200 members – the small(er) the better.” He went on to indicate the committee “should not include the members of the national committee, except, of course, yourself; …not too many senators and Congressmen.” He also wanted state chairmen and “woman associate chairmen,” and “a good many people such as John W. Davis, James M. Cox, former National Committeemen, etc. who should be invited although they hold no official position.”

Roosevelt felt compelled to add to Shaver: “I don’t need to assure you, my dear fellow, that there is no ulterior motive in his letter of mine, nor do I represent any candidate or any group. Being obviously not a candidate myself makes it clear that I think that I am honestly

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working only for the good of the party, and you can, of course, call on me to help in any way.” Roosevelt’s reassertion that he was a neutral observer pointed to the way that he sought to portray himself with this letter, but he soon abandoned the ruse.

**Attempts at Party Unity**

Franklin Roosevelt’s most substantial response was to Senator Thomas Walsh, from Montana, who served as convention chairman at Madison Square Garden, in a letter on February 28. In this letter, he synthesized the results, providing a real-time glimpse at the way that Roosevelt interpreted the responses to his Circular Letter and efforts to restructure the Democratic Party. He targeted Walsh (and Clem Shaver before) because of their status as party and convention chairmen (Walsh ostensibly was head of the delegates until the next convention elected a permanent chairman in 1928), and believed they would be the individuals to act on the delegates’ (and, primarily, Roosevelt’s) suggestions. Roosevelt told Senator Walsh that he “personally wrote” to every delegate to the Democratic convention, “asking their counsel as to the best means of making the Democracy stronger and more militant nationally.” He told Walsh that he received responses from “hundreds of delegates, representing every state in the Union.”

Roosevelt claimed that the party was in agreement on the fundamental principles, stating that the Democratic Party “must be unqualifiedly the Party representative of progress and liberal thought.” In a theme that he would return to in the months to come, Roosevelt saw the split in historic terms: “In other words, the clear line of demarcation which differentiated the political

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thought of Jefferson on one side and of Hamilton on the other, must be restored.” He returned to his platitudinal explanations of the differences between the major parties: Democrats “must make it clear that it seeks primarily the good of the average citizen through the free rule of the whole electorate, as opposed to the Republican Party which seeks a mere moneyed prosperity of the nation through the control of government by a self-appointed aristocracy of wealth and of social and economic power.”

The second note Roosevelt made to Walsh condensed all of the regional schisms. The Democratic Party should not confuse basic principles with temporary local matters. Roosevelt insisted that abiding by this suggestion would allow the party to make a coherent national platform that did not confuse regional divisions with party deficiencies. His third point was to focus on the party’s principles instead of any focus on personalities, keeping personal preferences for firebrands like McAdoo or Smith.

Roosevelt recounted the five fundamental principles that he listed in his original Circular Letter, stating that the majority of the respondents agreed with the suggestions (keeping the committee running year-round; uniting the national and state party organizations; equipping the national committee to raise funds year-round; equipping the national committee with a publicity apparatus; and having a regular conference of party leaders).

The final point was one that Franklin Roosevelt had been angling for (likely the main reason for writing the Circular Letter): a conference of Democrats from every state to be held that spring. Meeting face-to-face with party leaders on a consistent basis likely would have

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398 FDR Circular Letter Response, Franklin Roosevelt to Thomas Walsh; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 102-104.
399 FDR Circular Letter Response, Franklin Roosevelt to Thomas Walsh.
400 FDR Circular Letter Response, Franklin Roosevelt to Thomas Walsh; and Craig, After Wilson, 86-87, 182-183.
provided Roosevelt with a forum where his talents as a back-slapping pol could be welcomed and appreciated, and without the burden of elected office to distract or bind him. Roosevelt was already planning such an event (he was planning one before he even wrote the Circular Letter in December), but he wanted to make it appear as a democratic suggestion by the respondents and not his own ploy. That very few of the respondents independently suggested a conference of leaders was immaterial.401

The push for a conference of party leaders was Franklin Roosevelt’s first test of his new standing in the party, and he wanted to ensure that the conference was a success. The conference plan was not well-received in all quarters, however. Naturally, there were suspicions about Roosevelt’s true motivations. McAdoo, among others, was critical: “When I hear that Franklin Roosevelt is attempting to essay the role of Moses to lead us out of the wilderness into which he and Tammany and the bosses drove us in the last election,” McAdoo wrote to a South Dakota supporter. “I begin to feel that either he assumes there is no intelligence left in the Democratic rank and file of the country or there cannot be any, if he is taken seriously.”402 Louis Lang from The American published a gossipy article on February 10, casting Roosevelt’s peace conference as an effort to oust Clem Shaver from the chairmanship. Lang also cast aspersions on Roosevelt’s long-scheduled trip to Florida. In a section titled “Roosevelt Busy in South,” Lang wrote that “Mr. Roosevelt is in Florida conferring with Southern leaders about his own availability for the Presidential nomination and the employment of his reorganization plan to promote it.” He added that Roosevelt was scheming, along with other Northeastern operatives, to force Shaver to eliminate the debt first before another schism erupted between the Smith and

401 FDR Circular Letter Response, Franklin Roosevelt to Thomas Walsh; and Craig, After Wilson, 87-88.
402 Craig, After Wilson, 90.
McAdoo forces, reigniting the Madison Square Garden brawl for the intervening four years. 403

Franklin Roosevelt swiftly retaliated in a direct letter to Louis Lang. “It is more in sorrow than in anger that I must slap you on the wrist,” he began. “I wonder whether you have been too long in the newspaper and political game to recollect that there still are some Americans who can endeavor to render public service without thought of personal advantage to themselves. I hope you have not fallen as low as that and I must, therefore, ascribe your statement to hurt my own somewhat feeble but wholly disinterested attempt to make the Democratic Party a greater force for the good in the American government.” 404 This was another example of Roosevelt trying to control the narrative, down to the way his actions were portrayed. Roosevelt was anything but disinterested, and he knew his actions, regardless of result, would not be seen as feeble.

Roosevelt continued, making sure to correct the record on his actions, as well as once again cast himself as an innocent. “As a matter of fact I am in Florida solely because I hope eventually to regain the use of my legs without crutches or steel braces. I am on a boat down among the Keys far south of Miami. I have seen no southern leaders whatsoever...I suppose you are such a hopeless cynic that it would be useless for me to tell you that I have no desire to run for the presidency in 1928, so we will let you go at that!” 405

Franklin Roosevelt’s plans for a conference received publicity in a *New York Times* article catching up with John W. Davis on March 2nd. Davis advised that the conference should “properly discuss ways and means, organization and funds.” He continued, “I don’t think anything would be gained by attempting to map out a party program or formulate a platform.” The article was notable for Davis abdicating his leadership position: “I make no claim to

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405 Letter, Franklin Roosevelt to Louis Lang.
leadership, either titular or otherwise, but I expect to be a working Democrat the rest of my life.” Roosevelt would get no disagreement from the most recent nominee.

A week later, *The New York Times* published an article claiming “Senators Endorse Democratic Parley,” revealing all of the details of the letter between Roosevelt and Thomas Walsh. Senate leader Joseph Robinson from Arkansas wrote: “It is first essential that everything possible be done to eliminate the spirit of factionalism which marred the proceedings of the New York convention...a vitalized leadership is required, but it cannot come until factional influences are subdued.” The article also noted that there were several issues confronting Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts: there was no set location, with all of the regional factionalism still haunting the party less than a year after the disastrous convention, and the date had not been set (in the article, Shaver and Davis were in disagreement about when the meeting should occur). Further, McAdoo and Smith would not be in attendance; their supporters’ intransigence were among the major reasons the peace conference was required.

Soon thereafter, the reticence of Democrats to interrogate their problems took over the narrative. The reported eagerness of Democrats in Congress was countered by another *New York Times* article, published March 21st, now arguing that “Democrats Oppose Hasty Convention.” Democrats in the Senate and House reportedly met Roosevelt’s call for a conference of party leaders with passivity, particularly over the high number of attendees proposed by Roosevelt (around 200). The article also dictated that Roosevelt “stressed that candidacies should be taboo, and he was especially solicitous...to getting the party back to fundamental principles, to the exclusion of local and ephemeral questions.” Further, Clem Shaver told *The New York Times* on

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April 4th that he was “disposed to wait until after the next Congressional cycle, in direct contrast with Roosevelt’s insistence that the Democratic schisms were an immediate danger to the party’s future.”

When plans for the national peace conference started to fray, Eastern Democrats convened at the Jefferson Dinner in New York City on April 19th. John W. Davis, Al Smith, and William Pattangall were the major luminaries in attendance, but Clem Shaver begged off, and Franklin Roosevelt was still in Florida recuperating. One of the major takeaways was Homer Cummings introducing policy to finally rid the party from the two-thirds and unit rules, seen by many Circular Letter respondents and party leaders as the major reason for disharmony at Madison Square Garden. Cummings understood that the movement away from the two-thirds and unit rules were vehemently opposed by Southern Democrats, who viewed these traditional measures as the last vestige of their floor strength at conventions (and a way to keep some control in the face of the growing demographic changes recently favoring Northern Democrats in cities). Cummings offered no specifics, but the discussion was begun.

In a letter to Iowa delegate H.B. Bracewell, Roosevelt appeared to sense that the conference might not happen as he intended, and he began to take surprising and definitive positions. He reiterated his plans for party reformation and discussed the crisis of identifying a coherent ideology, with a surprising consequence: “There is no reason why the Democracy of all parts of the country cannot agree substantially on policies—the rank and file are given progressive in every section. There are, of course, conservative leaders and members but they too, exist. In all parts of the country. For instance, I know Democrats in Georgia and Iowa and California who

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are just as conservative as the present Coolidge administration. The quicker they line up with the Republican Party where they belong, the better for us, for by their action they will make it necessary for the really progressive Republicans eventually to come over to us.”410 Few party leaders had advocated purging members (Roosevelt’s idea never truly went away; see his purging efforts in Section V), but Roosevelt clearly believed that conservative members were weighing down the party’s ability to become progressive.

Roosevelt took another strong position against the two-thirds and unit rules, calling them “undemocratic and harmful.” He continued: “The so-called unit rule has tied us up for days and days unnecessarily. I am, for instance, convinced, and I am sure you will agree with me, that if in New York last June the unit rule and the two-thirds rule had both been abolished on say the third day of the voting, we would have nominated a candidate within 24 hours – and the candidate would not have been either McAdoo or Smith.”411 As a consistent and doggedly partisan Smith man throughout the convention proceedings, his position had added significance.

Roosevelt concluded by again bemoaning the lack of party infrastructure, but also insisted against identifying a party leader or nominee at this stage. “It is wholly ridiculous to talk or even to think about candidates for 1928 at the present time, or even for another two years. The probability is that same individual at present undreamed of will be our nominee. You and I may not even know his name. Many things will happen in the next two years.”412 This insistence could have been a way to focus attention on the party reformation for which he was working hard towards, but the final line left open the possibility that the nominee might come from an

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411 FDR Circular Letter Response, Franklin Roosevelt to H.B. Bracewell; and Neal, Happy Days Are Here Again, 181-186.
unexpected place. Roosevelt had lost his penchant for long-term planning in the aftermath of his paralysis, and apparently wanted the Democratic Party to keep its options open as well. Whether he would be the man to fill the void would be determined by his health and the success of his reforming efforts.

**Jefferson vs. Hamilton: Identifying a Democratic Identity**

One of the other direct results of the Circular Letter was Franklin Roosevelt’s interest in providing a historical legacy with which Democrats could identify. The large number of respondents who identified party forebears certainly made evident that Democrats, deeply divided and concerned about the future of their party, yearned to at least share a set of principles, if not a coherent sense of how to move forward. For Roosevelt, this was an opportunity to interrogate his real understanding of the party’s history and principles. This moment also provided Franklin Roosevelt with the chance to craft the narrative to which his party could conform. Franklin Roosevelt seized on Thomas Jefferson’s identity, and used his understanding of Jefferson’s legacy to provide his brand of party politics the guiding personality it needed.

As discussed in Chapter II, Roosevelt never provided a definitive statement on why he identified with the Democratic Party. His party loyalty was particularly curious as a patrician heir in upstate New York, though he never demonstrated any indication that he gave the matter much thought, either. His father was a Democrat, and Franklin sought to emulate those around him throughout his entire life. At Groton and Harvard, his political identity was fluid: he was a pronounced Democrat (except when his famous cousin was a candidate), but he never could point to why, outside of his definite attraction to personalities. His experience in the New York General Assembly and Wilson Administration did not clarify his conception of the party, but he clearly enjoyed the parrying that political combat afforded. In the space of one year, from 1920
to 1921, he reached his political apex and nadir, going from the party’s nominee for vice president and Wilson surrogate to fighting for his life and political career in the aftermath of his polio attack. He recognized how vital politics were to his life, and how vital his role could be within his party, but the challenge would be providing a unified message as a party leader to capitalize on the Circular Letter.

Several of the respondents mentioned Jefferson or Jeffersonian Democracy, but the references were as vague as Roosevelt’s own when discussing conservatism and progressivism: the terms were opaque. Roosevelt clearly wanted to gain a better understanding of Thomas Jefferson’s imprint on the Democratic Party. Hollins Randolph, a delegate from Virginia and great-great-grandson of Thomas Jefferson, wrote to Franklin on May 4. He made reference to a conversation between the two men about Jefferson: “I wanted to talk with you Saturday about the suggestion you made therein in regard to a comparative history of Hamilton and Jefferson…” There was no copy of the communication from Roosevelt to Randolph, but the discussion about the study was notable. While Randolph declined the project, citing his limited schedule, he did provide some guiding information to Roosevelt. He stressed that the study of Jefferson should be non-partisan and “modern, up to date, and thoroughly readable,” and if done properly, could be “one of the best things that could happen to the Democratic Party.”

Randolph continued by offering some vague and obviously biased perspective: “I have always thought myself that the fundamental difference between Hamilton and Jefferson was that Jefferson believed in humanity without reservations; whereas Hamilton disbelieved in humanity unless it had strong laws and the leadership of great men. The fundamental differences between

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these two great men grew largely out of their environment and birthplace... Jefferson wanted a government which would leave the people in the full enjoyment of all of their personal liberties and unrestricted in their actions (or, at least, just as near as may be); whereas Hamilton’s view was that the government should come first and the people second. To use a crude illustration, Hamilton was interested in the hive and Jefferson in the individual bees...The two men were almost antithetic. Jefferson’s whole life was spent in inculcating ideas of liberty and freedom.” Roosevelt aligned with Randolph’s way of thinking, though he continued to pursue other scholarly approaches to reinforce this idea.414

Coincidentally, historian Claude Bowers was completing his analysis of Thomas Jefferson and his adversary, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, with Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America published later that year. Bowers’ work did not even have the guise of non-partisanship: Bowers was a Democratic loyalist and his books were informed by the Dunning School, ascribing a martyr status to Democrats in the South during and after Reconstruction. Josephus Daniels, Roosevelt’s mentor and boss at the Navy Department, was an admirer and friend of Bowers, likely leading to Roosevelt’s association with the historian and author. Regardless, just months after talking to Hollins Randolph about commissioning a historian to do a comprehensive study of Thomas Jefferson, Claude Bowers delivered the study.415

It was clear that Franklin Roosevelt read Jefferson and Hamilton. At Harvard, he had majored in history, but the only book review he ever penned was for Bowers’ work, in the New

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414 FDR Circular Letter Response, Hollins Randolph to Franklin Roosevelt.
Like Bowers, Roosevelt approached the subject with a partisan bent; both men were not interested in actually interrogating Thomas Jefferson’s ideology or approach to governance. Instead, Bowers and Roosevelt both sought to reframe Jefferson’s imprint on the Democratic Party for their benefit in the current political climate. Roosevelt’s review was titled “Is There a Jefferson on the Horizon?” and began with the line “I felt like saying ‘At last’ as I read Mr. Claude Bowers’ thrilling Jefferson and Hamilton.” Roosevelt hyperbolically referenced his Circular Letter in the opening: “A year ago I took occasion in a letter addressed to more than a thousand Democratic leaders throughout the country to refer in passing to the difference between the Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian ideals for an American method of government, and to apply their fundamental differences to present-day policies of our two great parties.” He used the review to attack the press (which he felt unfairly maligned his letter-writing though no examples were provided) and “the romantic cult which has surrounded the name of Alexander Hamilton.” In Roosevelt’s reading of the book, Jefferson was the “savior of the deeper ideals of the Revolution,” and Roosevelt cast him as the virtuous antidote to Hamilton’s scheming and divisive machinations.416

Franklin Roosevelt laid bare his true intentions for the comparison in his characterization of Hamilton and Jefferson’s personalities. To him, the dichotomy was between “the natural democrat and the natural aristocrat,” and “the mobilization of the masses against the aristocracy of the few.” He centered the Democratic Party’s appeal in simplistic terms: “Jefferson’s faith in mankind was vindicated; his appeal to the intelligence of the average voter bore fruit; his conception of a democratic republic came true...” Roosevelt closed with a dramatic flourish,
clearly viewing the book as a call to arms, and an invocation for his service: “I have a breathless feeling as I lay down the book—a picture of escape after escape which this nation passed through in those first ten years; a picture of what might have been if the Republican Party had been finally organized as Alexander Hamilton sought. But I have a breathless feeling, too, as I wonder if, a century and a quarter later, the same contending forces are not again mobilizing. Hamiltons we have today. Is a Jefferson on the horizon?”417

Bowers’ book solidified Franklin Roosevelt’s political alignment. While Roosevelt had always admired Jefferson, and Democrats had long listed the third president as one of their guiding figures, Bowers’ book illuminated what Jefferson’s name and legacy meant to the party and its followers, even providing a modern context for the fractious times. From this point forward, Roosevelt made frequent reference to Thomas Jefferson, and he frequently found opportunities to align his observations and practices with his understanding of Jefferson’s approach to democracy. In addition, Roosevelt developed a friendship with Bowers, encouraging his future works, including The Tragic Era, published in 1929. Bowers became increasingly partisan, delivering a nominating speech at the 1928 Democratic Convention. When Roosevelt became president, he rewarded Bowers with ambassadorships to Spain and Chile. The two men remained in contact, even as Bowers became critical of some of Roosevelt’s New Deal initiatives. To Roosevelt’s way of thinking, he was simply taking the reins of the party as Jefferson would have, and realizing the true extent of the office through sheer political will.418

417 Roosevelt, “Jefferson on the Horizon”; Cross, Diplomatic Education of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 126; Rauch, Roosevelt Reader, 43-47; Rollins, Roosevelt and Howe, 222; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 104.

There was one clear impact on Franklin Roosevelt’s political development from this episode: the particular aspect of Jeffersonian Democracy that Roosevelt internalized and used in his political ascent was the idea that Jefferson’s strength came through the creation and maintenance of a political mandate. The development of this idea took some time: Roosevelt would not run for office of his own until late in 1928. But, very quickly after his election as governor of New York and in anticipation of his run for the 1932 presidency, Franklin understood the importance of expanding the Democratic Party’s constituency base and he worked to attract new voters. Roosevelt seized on the Democratic Party’s growing success in cities and voters’ growing apathy towards the ruling Republican Party to draw disaffected voters into the Democrats’ tent. In the 1932 election, Roosevelt attracted a majority of African-American voters to switch party affiliation for the first time in history, and he moved to reward voters with programs aimed at ending the economic hardships. Seen through this prism, the New Deal programs Roosevelt pushed through during his presidency were a way of keeping his constituency satisfied and loyal; it was antithetic to the way the Republican Party had governed nationally throughout the 1920s, with the associationalism (government being used to favor and help businesses, with the intended outcome that a strong economy helped everyone) favored by Presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover benefitting corporations and businesses. Roosevelt, like his famous cousin, modernized the presidency by completely recalculating how the office could be used.419

Roosevelt’s appreciation for Jefferson, like the admiration for Bowers, did not abate when he became president. Roosevelt pushed for large-scale commemorations of Jefferson’s

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service to the nation, including the minting of the Jefferson nickel in 1938 (in anticipation of the bicentennial of Jefferson’s birth in 1943) and the acceleration of the Jefferson Memorial across the Tidal Basin from the White House. When Roosevelt took office, he inquired about plans for memorializing Jefferson, long dormant and backlogged during the Great Depression. Ten years later, Roosevelt dedicated the Memorial himself. There was criticism that Roosevelt had too large a role in the monument’s design, as the quotes on the walls were paraphrased as though to endorse Roosevelt’s governing style and New Deal policies, with key sections of Jefferson’s calls to liberty and revolution excised. This episode perfectly encapsulated Roosevelt’s infatuation with Jefferson: reflecting not the man himself or his writings, but rather Franklin Roosevelt’s understanding of Jefferson’s legacy and a desire to reflect the Founding Father’s ethos, though he had no interest in emulating Jefferson’s method of governing. Notably, Roosevelt focused on Jefferson the politician, the revolutionary, and the man of the people, but not Jefferson the president and executive. He was not looking to Jefferson for guidance on how to govern, but rather on how to build a brand and constituency.

**Acting on the Circular Letter**

One key to judging the success of the Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter of 1924 was how the party reacted to the fundamentals as suggested by Roosevelt. His first suggestion, that the Democratic National Committee should operate year-round, was one of the first to be enacted by Chairman Clem Shaver. On May 7, Shaver announced that the party was expanding operations in the Washington, D.C. office, and would no longer operate as a “skeleton” crew in the years between presidential elections (they would expand to four year-round employees). Shaver explained that, before, he was worried about intervening in the factional debates, and that

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there was relatively little to do between elections. “Militant” Democrats, Franklin Roosevelt among them, impressed upon him that constant action and proactive responses to the issues facing the nation were required by the party’s leadership. Roosevelt was not credited with the decision, but the timing, mere months after the letter suggest that Shaver was responding to the call to action expressed in the letter. As chairman, Shaver understood that more was now required of him, and in the absence of a national political leader, he needed to assume control.421

The second fundamental, a closer relationship between the national and state Democratic leaders, was an ongoing problem. Roosevelt had spearheaded an effort to be more inclusive with state party leaders, from the Circular Letter to the proposed peace conference, but this problem would be an ongoing issue in future elections. It should be noted that Roosevelt’s suggestion was that the state and national party apparatuses be brought in “far closer touch,” a deliberately vague proposition with few goalposts for measuring success. The third fundamental concerned party financials, with Roosevelt charging the Democratic National Committee to become more business-like in raising consistent funds for the party’s candidates and campaigns. On this issue, Shaver was the most proactive, announcing in early February that they had completely paid off the campaign debt from 1924 and had plans in place to continue the fundraising indefinitely. Shaver outlined the surplus of funds available for Congressional candidates in 1926, and his plans to continue Victory Clubs as a fundraising arm. These groups were largely locally-run, but had proven successful in 1924 in offsetting expenditures. Again, Shaver’s actions were already in progress when Roosevelt’s letter was dispatched, but Roosevelt underscored how vital consistent fundraising was. Indeed, in Al Smith and Roosevelt’s campaigns, there would be

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much to worry about, but fundraising was never the vital concern that it had been in 1920 and 1924.422

The fourth fundamental, regarding consistent publicity, was also addressed by Clem Shaver in the months after the Circular Letter. In the same article announcing the year-round apparatus of the Democratic National Committee, Clem Shaver discussed hiring someone whose sole job would be to direct the publicity of the Democratic Party. Shaver credited John W. Davis’ lawyer, Harold Hathaway, with the inspiration for the full-time position, but the timing indicated that the Circular Letter had at least prompted those in the party to begin thinking about publicity as a year-round proposition to remain competitive with the Republican Party. The fifth fundamental, that the party leaders should meet more frequently, outside of the conventions, was arguably the one that first inspired Roosevelt to write the Circular Letter. While his plan had early support, and the participation of many whom Roosevelt wanted, the issue was one that Roosevelt knew could be a long-term reorienting of the party’s leadership apparatus, and not one so easily fixed. Notably, when Roosevelt served as president, he was not as interested in the party’s leadership providing constant contact or offering diverging opinions, but it was a very different matter as a party player in 1924.423

Beyond the fundamentals, some of the other suggestions offered by Circular Letter correspondents were easier to resolve than others. For instance, some delegates suggested focusing less on personalities and more on party principles, but this was an idealistic if untenable proposition for a political party in the modern era. Part of the suggestion related to this notion was that the party leaders should avoid boosting presidential candidates until the conventions,

422 “Doubts Democrats Can Get Davis Again; Shaver Does Not Expect Him to Be Available as Candidate—Party Deficit Wiped Out,” The New York Times, February 19, 1925, 1; Craig, After Wilson, 184-187; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 273-274.
but this was also difficult to avoid. In 1928, Al Smith was a huge front-runner, and he entered the
convention without any serious competition, especially once William McAdoo and the previous
nominees James Cox and John W. Davis declined to be considered. In 1932, Franklin Roosevelt
benefited from covert campaigning and the careful courting of delegates ahead of the convention
to prevent any serious contenders from emerging to thwart his frontrunner status. The next four
Democratic conventions, from 1936 to 1948, were largely pro forma, re-nominating the
incumbent presidents Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Adlai Stevenson was drafted into running in
1952 and 1956, and by 1960, Democratic candidates were competing in primary elections,
allowing party voters greater power in selecting the party’s nominee. Unfortunately for the
Circular Letter respondents, this process had the opposite effect, forcing the party into perpetual
speculation over the next nominating process.

In addition, the suggestions that the party was desperate for leadership would be an
ongoing struggle to define and to rectify. In terms of providing leadership of the Democratic
National Committee, Clem Shaver was a consistent and strong presence, and as mentioned
above, he moved quickly to address the major issues facing the party in the aftermath of the
disastrous convention. Al Smith seemingly undid all goodwill Shaver fostered by replacing him
with John Jacob Raskob, a businessman who had helped run DuPont and General Motors, but
with no political experience. Worse, Raskob had recently been a Republican and was a practicing
Jew, at a time when Al Smith’s Catholicism was causing enough problems among Southern
Democrats. Raskob was also unceasingly loyal to Smith, and did everything in his power to keep
the failed candidate and ex-governor in frontrunner status, even as Franklin Roosevelt started
gaining widespread support for the 1932 nomination. Raskob was efficient at fundraising and
focused on the Democratic Party’s financials, but little attention was paid to the other issues
facing the party. Roosevelt proved the spoils of presidential success when he replaced Raskob with Jim Farley, and treated the chair and national committee as a publicity arm for his New Deal programs and Democratic allies who were in lockstep with his policies. Eventually, the opportunity for selecting party leadership was taken away from presidential candidates and given to the Democratic National Committee membership.424

In terms of political leadership of the party, Roosevelt was again the game-changer after his election as president. With him, there was no question as to who dictated party policy between the president and Congressional Democrats, and his Democratic successors never ceded decision-making authority, either. Roosevelt’s conception of the legislature mirrored that of his cousin: Congress was a vehicle for the president’s agenda, there to do his bidding, and he ensured that Democrats in Congress fell in line. As Roosevelt altered the ideology of the party and the way it operated, Congressional Democrats clearly recognized that their success was tied to his. This caused havoc for Democrats who objected to his New Deal programs or the outsized growth of the federal government on his watch (Section V details Roosevelt’s evolving relationship with the Democratic National Committee and the party in general).

A Circular Letter complaint that was quickly (if unintentionally) remedied was the massive distrust and disgust with the Bryan brothers. William Jennings and Charles W. wore out their welcome with Democrats, particularly those from urban areas and the Northeast. Roosevelt initially tried to include the Bryans in his planned peace conference but received only resistance. Bryan was still hurt over his reception at the nominating convention, and was deeply mistrustful

of Al Smith’s permissiveness towards alcohol, or at least, was insufficiently impressed by Smith’s repeated claims that he was an enforcer of the amendment. Though the two men eventually met in Warm Springs in April 1925, nothing was accomplished and both men issued perfunctory statements to the press. Roosevelt triumphed, however; the party had moved on from Bryan at last. William Jennings Bryan suffered one more humiliation, however, when he joined the prosecution as a fundamentalist and Bible scholar in the highly publicized Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee. Though his side was victorious, Bryan’s responses to defense attorney Clarence Darrow’s dogged cross-examination were ridiculed in the press. He died five days after the close of the trial. His brother returned to Nebraska, where he would serve an additional term as governor and mayor of Lincoln, but he never participated in national Democratic activities after 1924.425

One of the other suggestions offered by Circular Letter respondents was met with mixed results: avoiding repeats of the Madison Square Garden fracas by refusing to debate controversial subjects, like the Klan, on the convention floor. In July 1928, Al Smith’s nomination was a foregone conclusion, but the real drama took the next afternoon, as the convention debated the platform planks. This was a direct change from four years before, when the Smith camp maneuvered to have the platform debate take place before the presidential nominating as a way of complicating McAdoo’s stated neutrality on the Klan issue. But the change proved unfortunate to Smith, as the compromise platform plank committed "the party and its nominees to an honest effort to enforce the eighteenth amendment and all other provisions of the Federal Constitution and all laws enacted pursuant thereto.” Smith wrote in his acceptance telegram: “It is well-known that I believe there should be fundamental changes in the present

425 Brands, Truant to His Class, 198-201; Murray, 103rd Ballot, 276-277; and Witcover, Party of the People, 343-344.
provisions for national prohibition...I feel it to be the duty of the chosen leader of the people to point the way which, in his opinion, leads us to a sane, sensible solution of a condition which, I am convinced, is entirely unsatisfactory to the great mass of our people.” The order, selecting the nominee and then settling the platform for him to run on, was problematic, and anti-Smith Democrats throughout the South voted for Herbert Hoover, with the Democrats losing Texas, Virginia, and North Carolina for the first time in decades, in addition to Tennessee and Florida’s defection. While much could rightly be blamed on prejudice against Smith’s Catholicism, the Democratic Party did no favors with its platform voting. In 1932, Roosevelt continued his studied avoidance of anything definitive or controversial by offering only, “I can run on whatever plank the convention adopts.”

Of course, taking heed of the Circular Letter suggestion would have helped avoid two future Democratic Conventions devolving into chaos over platform votes. The 1948 convention faced a vote over a progressive civil rights platform, with Southern Democrats so angered over the move that they fled the convention hall and nominated South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond to run as a Dixiecrat, endangering Harry Truman’s reelection bid. In 1968, peace Democrats pushed for a platform plank limiting American’s commitment in Vietnam, but it was not enough to stall the violent protests taking place simultaneously in the streets of Chicago. In the aftermath of that incident, some forty-four years after the Madison Square Garden debacle, the Democratic Party leadership appointed George McGovern to head a committee, called the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection. The Commission ushered in the modern

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426 Black, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 275-279; Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 74-102; Slayton, Empire Statesman, 256-258; and Witcover, Party of the People, 344-345.
era of party primaries and inclusiveness for minorities, with greater access for delegates to have input into how the platforms are created.\textsuperscript{427}

Roosevelt did act on two of the suggestions from the Circular Letter, though they were long-term projects: removing the two-thirds and unit rules from the convention procedures. Many Circular Letter respondents blamed the two-thirds and unit rules with allowing the regional factions supporting William McAdoo and Al Smith to drag the convention proceedings for days without any reasonable hope of winning. The two-thirds rule, in particular, allowed candidates with a large following but without a distinct majority to block other candidates, as both McAdoo and Smith demonstrated in 1924, when both recognized that they would not be the nominee but that they could also block their chief adversary.\textsuperscript{428}

Ironically, though Roosevelt was vehemently opposed to both measures, he owed his presidency to the unit rule. While Roosevelt entered the 1932 nominating convention as a strong frontrunner, as the governor of New York, he did not have the backing of many New York politicians still loyal to the incumbent nominee, Al Smith, and relied on support from Southern Democrats to keep his name afloat. As Texas Speaker of the House of Representatives John Nance Garner and others challenged his supremacy in the South, Roosevelt sent acolytes to threaten the delegates from Southern states against defecting. At the beginning of the third round of balloting, Roosevelt’s camp dispatched Louisiana Senator Huey Long to threaten the Mississippi delegation, whose internal polling was 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ to 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ delegates for Roosevelt. Under the unit rule, all 20 delegate votes went to Roosevelt, but if the rule was dissolved (as Roosevelt himself had been advocating leading up to the convention), it is likely Roosevelt would have lost the nomination. Instead, Mississippi held for Roosevelt, and Garner removed himself from the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{427} Witcover, \textit{Party of the People}, 430-433, 578-580.
\textsuperscript{428} Witcover, \textit{Party of the People}, 353.
\end{footnotesize}
proceedings (he would be nominated as vice president), assuring Roosevelt the nomination on
the fourth ballot. By 1936, both rules were removed from the Democratic Convention,
coincidentally at a time when Franklin Roosevelt had no competition for the nomination. From
then on, Democrats required a simple majority of delegates, even when the primaries and super-
delegates were added in subsequent nominating cycles.  

With the removal of the two-thirds and unit rules, the Democratic Party also experienced
the resolution of another of the problems discussed in the Circular Letter responses: the regional
resentments dividing the party, particularly on the part of Southern Democrats. Delegates from
the South believed that they were being taken for granted by party leaders: the region was the
only one that was reliably loyal to the Democratic Party’s nominee in the early twentieth century,
but it was increasingly minimized in the decision-making at the nominating conventions. For
Southern Democrats, there were many signs that the region was being taken for granted by their
national party: Al Smith’s consistent undermining of the prohibition amendment that many
Southerners took very seriously throughout the 1920s; the rejection of William McAdoo and
other Southern candidates; Al Smith’s nomination over Southern opposition in 1928 (though
they did not field a credible candidate to oppose him, and Smith sought to balance the ticket with
Joe Robinson, beloved senator from Arkansas; and the lingering effects of the Klan debacle in
1924. The 1928 election sealed this transition, as for the first time, a Democratic candidate won a
majority of the large cities; Smith won the ten largest. The Democratic Party was clearly in
transition, and Smith’s religion and outlook on prohibition proved a galvanizing force in
realigning the party.  

Days Are Here Again*, 181-186; and Witcover, *Party of the People*, 352-354.
430 For a complete demographic examination of the Al Smith’s voters in 1928 Presidential Election, see
Daniel Burner’s chapter “The Composition of the 1928 Vote,” in *The Politics of Provincialism*, 217-243; Allan
Realignments.

The 1928 contest featured the largest turnout in history, and Smith won almost as many votes as Calvin Coolidge garnered four years before. While the result in the Electoral College did not point to any silver lining, Democrats could take solace that the disintegration of the Solid South was eased by a huge growth among minority and urban voters, new immigrants, and workers, in addition to the Catholic vote increasing and being consolidated in the Democratic Party (Catholics had been split evenly in previous elections).431

The debate between whether 1928 or 1932 was the realignment election endures; this dissertation focuses on the responses of the candidates, and Roosevelt in particular, in dealing with voters’ interests during this chaotic period. Critical election theory examines the election where voters change party affiliation, resulting in a large-scale realignment of the party’s constituency and, going forward, the focus of the party in maintaining their electoral support. V.O. Key and Samuel Lubell first introduced the ideas in the 1950s, looking at how voters permanently changed their behavior by leaving their party for the opposition. Most elections were “maintaining” elections, where the majority party wins with a stable electoral coalition and the winning party reflects the status quo. A “deviating” election occurs when the minority party wins as a result of bad economic or international circumstances, a transformational candidate, or there is a split in the majority party. A “converting” election occurs when the majority party holds, but with an altered coalition. The most rare, the “critical” or “realigning” election occurs when the coalition has shifted allegiance and the majority party is displaced.432

431 Burner, Politics of Provincialism, 151-152; Craig, After Wilson, 186-187; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 276-277.
For instance, the 1896 election served as a consensus: the Democratic Party absorbed the Populists; William Jennings Bryan transformed the connection between voters and candidates with his campaign tour; and Democrats began the slow process of expanding their national constituency beyond the South, with the Civil War resentments no longer the focus for the intraparty conflicts. In this light, the 1928 election should be viewed as the converting election, when the fissures of Republican support in cities and among the working-class first became apparent. The 1932 election should be viewed either as a second converting election or a deviating, as the Great Depression rendered the Republican Party’s incumbent president ineffective; the Democrats might well have seized the White House regardless of who they ran and what coalitions they nurtured. By 1936, however, the realignment was complete: African Americans were fully integrated into the New Deal/Democratic coalition (the line between program and party purposely blurred); the Democrats and Roosevelt had attracted record numbers of dissatisfied farmers throughout the country, immigrants, the working class, and, importantly, organized labor to be permanent members of the party; and the Republican Party was repudiated in elections at every level. In *The Creation of a Democratic Majority*, Kristi Andersen successfully argued that the 1932-36 realignment represented not just a switch from Republican to Democratic Party for many of these coalitions, but the coming-of-age and mobilization of many first-time (former “potential” voters, in her terms) who would identify with

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433 Samuel Lubell wrote that there were consecutive realignments: “Before the Roosevelt Revolution there was an Al Smith Revolution...it was Smith who first slashed through the alignments that held firmly since the Civil War...”; Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952), 36; and Lichtman, *Prejudice and the Old Politics*, 19-21. Much of the disagreement rests on whether the voters held Al Smith’s Catholicism against him enough to deny the presidency in 1928. The results, outside of the slow ebbing of the urban vote, largely sustained the Republican coalition that propelled Hoover’s predecessors, Harding and Coolidge, to electoral success.
Roosevelt’s Democratic Party for these elections and remain faithful to his Democratic successors. Franklin Roosevelt understood how essential it was for voters to identify with the political parties, and he cemented the Democratic Party’s legacy for an entire generation with his New Deal programs and the transformation of the federal government.434

The Party of Roosevelt

Governor of New York.

Some divisions were eternal barriers between Democrats, however. If circular letters between party faithful were dispersed after every election, the debate over ideological differences would remain a constant source of angst. In this way, Roosevelt provided his greatest party leadership and most noteworthy evasion. Rather than successfully navigate the difference between liberal, progressive, and conservative, Roosevelt reformed the party to reflect his policies as a candidate and president. He provided the type of leadership to Democratic partisans that he had always gravitated towards: personality-driven politics.435

Franklin Roosevelt’s interest in party reformation was always paired with his interest in appearing above the fray of partisan party dynamics. This was apparent after the Circular Letter, as Roosevelt weighed his next move. As noted previously, Roosevelt’s extensive correspondence during this period demonstrated how people-pleasing he remained throughout his public life, almost always telling respondents what he thought they wanted to hear; even his more disgruntled and angry letters were couched with self-effacing humor and attempts to deflect his ambition. But, on one note, he was absolutely consistent: that he was devoting his money, attention, and energy to walking again. Several people recommended that Roosevelt visit Warm

Springs, Georgia, and he became quickly enamored with the community and recuperative water. There was no political advantage to be gained from Roosevelt’s personal investment in making Warm Springs into a community for other paralytics from across the country. He worked to attract the leading doctors in the field, in hopes of regaining the full use of his legs. Roosevelt came closest to standing and walking unaided in the buoyant water of Warm Springs, but his progress out of water was limited. He made the small, rural Southern community his third home (after Hyde Park and his Manhattan townhouse), and spent most of each year from 1925 to 1928 in the Georgia water.436

As the 1928 election cycle approached, Franklin Roosevelt was an essential part of the Al Smith presidential campaign. Defying all of the suggestions from the 1924 Circular Letter to resist having any front-runners for the presidential nomination until the election year, Al Smith was the clear leading candidate. William McAdoo and John W. Davis refused all entreaties to relaunch their campaigns, and Smith retained the support of his core constituency from four years prior. Smith had the benefit of four additional strong years as New York Governor, and there was additional antipathy towards the Prohibition amendment among urban Democrats. Smith once again asked Roosevelt to serve as his campaign chairman and deliver his nominating speech at the Houston convention, and Roosevelt delivered again, even invoking the moniker from his 1924 speech, the “Happy Warrior.” Will Rogers quipped that Roosevelt “could have gone far in the Democratic Party but he has devoted his life to nominating Al Smith.”437

Nothing about the 1928 convention was as fractious, or even exciting, as the one from four years before. The drama came over the Prohibition plank, but even that was quickly

436 Goldberg, Making of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 86-104.
437 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 205-206; Josephson and Josephson, Al Smith, 373; Morgan, FDR, 286-287; Rollins, Jr., Roosevelt and Howe, 227-229; and Slayton, Empire Statesman, 254-255.
resolved. Smith’s nomination came on the very first ballot, and the entire convention was over in three days (fourteen days shorter than the Madison Square Garden fracas in 1924). Al Smith left the Houston convention convinced he would be the next president, clearly unaware of how polarizing his candidacy was to voters nationwide, and even among fellow Democrats. His Catholicism, Tammany roots, and advocacy for overturning Prohibition all drew detractors, and even resurrected the dwindling Ku Klux Klan back for one last push. Al Smith was naïve about how much of an issue his religion would be in the general election, but the ambivalence of Southern Democrats at his nomination should have been an indication. Democratic Party leaders wisely nominated the popular Senator Joseph Robinson from Arkansas as his vice president to shore up support among disappointed Southerners still angry about his stance on Prohibition and tense about turning the party over to a Northern urban Catholic with a distinct accent. Smith was also not a great national candidate: he had little interest in laying out policy past platitudes, and he made no effort to hide his disinterest in the world “beyond the Hudson (River).” Voters returned the favor. Herbert Hoover, the Secretary of Commerce for eight years, was no great campaigner, either. But, like Harding and Coolidge before him, Hoover could afford to guarantee his constituents the status quo and little else; his slogan, “A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage,” offered prosperity and affluence, and he was cagy about any policy differences between his vision for the presidency and his predecessors’.438

Al Smith made one very smart, calculated decision in the 1928 campaign that was fateful in altering the leadership and future of the Democratic Party: urging Franklin Roosevelt to run for governor of New York. Smith once again relied on Roosevelt to deliver his nominating

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speech at the Houston convention, aware of Roosevelt’s positive reputation among Democrats from across the country and the bearer of one of the most famous names in politics. As Smith’s close friend Proskauer told the governor in 1924, he also needed Roosevelt’s patrician bearing to help smooth Smith’s rougher edges. Now, as the presidential nominee, he was also concerned with his standing in his home state and his political future there. He was unable to run for re-election while running for the presidency, and clearly would need to branch out of New York if he was going to make a dent in Herbert Hoover’s electoral constituency. Roosevelt was the obvious choice to run in his stead: Roosevelt had an excellent reputation among New York Democrats and his name was popular throughout the state; in addition to his appeal in New York City, had he won election in a Republican-dominated district in the state legislature; and he had the financial resources to compete with the Republicans in the state. In addition, while Roosevelt was campaigning statewide, Smith could count on his consistent advocacy for Smith’s presidential aspirations without needing to be there himself.439

There were drawbacks to Smith abdicating his position to Franklin Roosevelt, however. If he lost the presidency and Franklin won the statehouse, Smith was fearful he would be eclipsed by Roosevelt in New York and in the Democratic Party. Though their interactions with each other were always friendly, Smith harbored deep jealousy of the obvious advantages Roosevelt’s wealth had provided. He also believed Roosevelt was a political lightweight, pointing to Roosevelt’s undistinguished record as a state legislator and Assistant Secretary of Navy. Smith also feared that Roosevelt’s paralysis would limit his ability to serve the office.440

440 Black, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 180-182; Goldberg, Making of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 105-108; and Morgan, FDR, 289-292.
For his part, Roosevelt was deeply ambivalent about running for the governorship. Obviously, Roosevelt still had political aspirations, but he and Louis Howe had privately circled 1932 as the year when, after years of dedication to regaining his ability to walk unaided, he would resume his political career, and then run for the presidency in 1936. Running for governor would also definitively end his carefully crafted aura of selfless party unifier and cast him as a partisan. Franklin famously avoided taking Al Smith’s telephone call, knowing that Smith would ask him to run and he would be forced to make a decision. Unbeknownst to him, Franklin’s wife, Eleanor, had been drafted by Smith to get Franklin on the telephone, and said “Take the nomination, Frank,” and Roosevelt quickly assented to run (Eleanor turned out to be disappointed that he so easily agreed to run, and Louis Howe was furious, telling his wife he hoped Franklin would lose the election). Smith condescendingly suggested that Roosevelt could keep all of Smith’s staff, and they could run a puppet organization. Franklin could spend most of the year in Georgia, Smith told him, and Smith could continue making the big decisions, if Roosevelt needed him. Roosevelt, as was his wont, did not signal how infantilizing or infuriating this suggestion was (beyond saying “Don’t hand me that baloney”), but he never forgot it, either.441

The governor’s race was short, with the nominating convention held in late September, leaving just six weeks for a campaign. Franklin and Eleanor threw their energy into the campaign, with Franklin pledging reform and prosperity, but little in the way of serious details. He challenged himself to make dozens of campaign appearances, providing New York voters an

opportunity to hear him, and to see with their eyes how vital and vibrant he was. Roosevelt was rewarded for his tireless campaign, and he won the governor’s race narrowly. Al Smith suffered an overwhelming defeat, including in his home state. Just as Smith feared, he was quickly eclipsed by Roosevelt’s rising star. Roosevelt was genial when he met with Smith to plan the transition, but he rejected most of Smith’s personnel suggestions. This included Roosevelt dismissing Smith’s secretary, Belle Moskowitz, effectively ending Smith’s plan to stage a shadow government.  

As governor, Roosevelt moved quickly to respond to problems, always projecting a flurry of activity. This was especially pronounced as the nation descended into the Great Depression, with New York City among the areas hardest hit, particularly in the banking and manufacturing sectors and there was a large demand on the relief charities. One of the hallmark achievements was using the St. Lawrence River for hydroelectric power, requiring bipartisan support. Roosevelt put aside his long-held differences with the Tammany Hall machine to use their support to push through economic initiatives, including over $20 million in relief headed by Henry Hopkins (later charged with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration). Roosevelt sensed, likely from the Circular Letter responses from five years before, that his electoral success and the future of the Democratic Party hinged on his offering distinctive differences from the Republicans. Eleanor and others advised Franklin to begin looking at social welfare programs, which served not just to “help” New Yorkers, but also fostered a relationship between politicians and constituents as never before.

442 Black, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 186-188; Daniels, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 73-75; Davis, FDR: The New York Years, 37-47, 52-53, 60-62; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal, 53-54; Josephson and Josephson, Al Smith, 401-410; Morgan, FDR, 293-300; and Tugwell, Democratic Roosevelt, 146-148, 170-176.

443 Frank Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1956), 7-8; Brands, Traitor to His Class, 229-233; Craig, After Wilson, 207-210; Daniels, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 75-77; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal, 55-57; and Goldberg, Making of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 118-120.
Franklin Roosevelt appointed one of Al Smith’s close associates, Frances Perkins, to head the New York State Department of Labor (which he created). In that position, Perkins implemented a series of progressive reforms, providing Roosevelt with a brand new platform to add to his political bona fides. Among the reforms Roosevelt and Perkins championed in New York were laws for minimum wage, fair work-week hours, unemployment programs, and “old-age pension” (the forebear for the Social Security Administration in Roosevelt’s Second New Deal). Roosevelt was re-elected in 1930 by a landslide, along with the rest of the Democratic ticket, demonstrating to Franklin Roosevelt that his initiatives were successful and could form the basis of his inevitable presidential bid.444

The 1932 Presidential Election.

After his reelection as governor, Franklin Roosevelt set his sights on the 1932 convention. As the popular governor of New York, with a positive reputation among Democratic leaders throughout the country as a unifier, and no disqualifying positions on any of the major positions, Roosevelt was a clear choice for many, particularly in the South. In perhaps a nod to Roosevelt’s efforts seven years before, the Democratic Party opened the 1932 Presidential Election season with a sophisticated effort to poll the party faithful on key issues. John Jacob Raskob wrote a letter to members of the 1928 Victory Fund, soliciting advice on which issues to highlight in the upcoming season, as well as an informal poll for presidential nominee. It should be noted that the poll featured only those who contributed to the 1928 Smith campaign, leaving some Southern Democrats out of the mix (as the region was largely ambivalent about Smith’s

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candidacy). Unsurprisingly, the issue garnering the largest number of votes was Prohibition, an albatross that Democrats had still not shaken. In the presidential poll, Roosevelt easily topped all competitors, with his nearest adversary, Al Smith, some twenty-five votes behind (not every respondent participated).445

Roosevelt, as always, was cautious about appearing overeager, but he had worked behind the scenes at three conventions where he dutifully served as nominator for Al Smith, so he was aware of the work that went into a successful nomination. This was also the last time that a Democratic presidential candidate could feign reluctance or disinterest in the nomination, continuing the charade of needing to be “asked” or called to service by his party. Quite simply, the outdated tradition was crippling the party’s nominee; campaigns were becoming larger productions, and the increased demand on the candidate to travel the country (each of the previous four nominees had steadily expanded the amount of contact between candidate and voters).446

Franklin Roosevelt faced an additional, more pressing concern to his nomination: Al Smith. Since leaving Albany, Smith busied himself with the construction of the new Empire State Building, where he kept his office and stewed over his perceived mistreatment from Roosevelt. Franklin seldom consulted with Smith, and had completely transformed the office, and had been rewarded by voters for his efforts. Smith quietly started lining up support from New York Democrats who were disgruntled with the growing size of the governor’s new programs and record deficit: Al Smith left a budget surplus of over $15 million, but by 1932,

Roosevelt’s administration had run a deficit of $90 million. As the convention neared, Smith’s plan was to thwart Roosevelt’s nomination, utilizing the two-thirds rule to block Roosevelt and force a brokered convention. There were just seventeen primaries held in 1932, and Smith stunned Roosevelt by winning in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and, most alarming, New York. John Nance Garner, the Speaker of the House from Texas, won his home state and California, with the backing of William Randolph Hearst.

Additionally, critics like H.L. Mencken and Walter Lippmann raised the question of Roosevelt’s aptitude for the job, as Lippmann accurately assessed that Roosevelt was “a highly impressionable person, without a firm grasp of public affairs, and without very strong convictions...an amiable man with many philanthropic impulses, but he is not the dangerous enemy of anything. He is too eager to please;” Heywood Broun from the American Newspaper Guild nicknamed him “Feather Duster Roosevelt.” Liberty magazine added to the speculation by running an article titled “Is Franklin D. Roosevelt Physically Fit Enough to Be President?” and interviewed an orthopedist and a neurologist for their diagnosis.

As Smith gained support among New York Democrats (thus depriving Roosevelt of a key constituency), he might have believed he was replaying the 1924 convention. Unlike in 1928, Smith understood that there were several potential challengers for the nomination, and as in 1924, he knew that his experience and relationships made him a powerful figure among an

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447 Roosevelt’s spending previewed his policy as president, spending on social programs to the detriment of the deficit.
448 Black, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 225-228; Davis, FDR: The New York Years, 243-246, 248-250, 296-300; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph, 228-240; Josephson, Al Smith, 401-410; and Neal, Happy Days Are Here Again, 35-64.
449 Christopher Clausen, “FDR’s Hidden Handicap,” The Wilson Quarterly (Summer 2005), 24-29; Craig, After Wilson, 226-232; Daniels, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 103-104; Davis, FDR: The New York Years, 220, 392; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal, 67-72; Houck and Kiewe, FDR’s Body Politics, 67-69; Morgan, FDR, 337-338; Neal, Happy Days Are Here Again, 164-175; Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 290-291; Tugwell, Democratic Roosevelt, 223-227; and Witcover, Party of the People, 350-351.
important bloc. But one key component was tremendously different: Franklin Roosevelt was not
William McAdoo. Roosevelt was far more organized and had none of the caution that had
marked McAdoo’s tortured ambivalence about running in 1920 and 1924. Smith also must have
recalled that each convention in the 1920s when Smith was nominated, it was Roosevelt who
delivered the speech, and the implicit stamp of approval from a class where Smith was deficient.
While Lippmann and other critics accurately described Roosevelt’s penchant for people-
pleasing, they also overlooked his tremendous capacity for political maneuvering. Franklin
Roosevelt had proven he was able to get his way and let his opponents believe they were
swindling him.450

Franklin Roosevelt was the most sophisticated opponent Al Smith had faced. Roosevelt,
though the Circular Letters, additional correspondence, and his political experiences, was far
more acquainted and better equipped for the backstage wrangling that the conventions required.
None of the other dark-horse candidates held the enmity for Roosevelt that a true thwarting effort
necessitated, though Smith reached out to his old nemesis, William Gibbs McAdoo, to join
efforts (a demonstration of how much Smith hated Roosevelt at this point); Roosevelt retained
his Southern support and McAdoo’s opposition to his candidacy faded. Roosevelt’s chief agents,
Louis Howe and James Farley, arranged for a conversation between Roosevelt and Speaker
Garner, with the vice presidency promised if Garner withdrew his name. Even the reappearance
of the prohibition issue failed to derail Roosevelt; he simply stated that he supported national

450 Cohen, et al, The Party Decides, 87-89, 99-101; Daniels, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 103-104; Freidel,
Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph, 279-290; Josephson and Josephson, Al Smith, 440-443; Morgan, FDR, 338-
341; Neal, Happy Days Are Here Again, 108-120; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 298-305. Al Smith was
clearly flummoxed by Franklin Roosevelt’s popularity, particularly in his home state. In his papers at the New York
State Archives were several articles and graphs analyzing the demographic shifts at play; among them, Frank Kent’s
eyessay updating his 1923 demographic analysis The Great Game of Politics with a section titled “Some New York
Figures.” Frank Kent “Some New York Figures,” (Miscellaneous Papers), Al Smith Collection: New York State
Archives, Albany, New York.
repeal of prohibition but thought that each state should retain the right to prohibit as necessary. This left him, as always, palatable to all sections: he did not threaten the beliefs of Southern Democrats and was welcomed by wets. Finally, as detailed previously, Roosevelt’s supporters among different delegations preserved the unit rule and he was able to withstand three ballots with no clear majority before finally winning on the fourth ballot.451

Franklin Roosevelt broke with tradition in a major and historic way at the 1932 convention: he became the first candidate from either party to appear at the convention and accept the nomination in person, flying into Chicago at word of his acceptance. This had several reasons: First, Roosevelt’s appearance positioned him in the situation he knew best. Few Democratic leaders were as adept at participating in the spectacle of a nominating convention, and Roosevelt’s eagerness to participate was no different as a candidate than as a spokesman or delegate. Second (and related to the first), Roosevelt’s appearance signaled that his candidacy would be different from all those who had come before him, without regard for traditions he deemed outmoded. Roosevelt knew his strength came in his interpersonal connection and relationships that he had cultivated over two decades in the party and at least ten years of active leadership. He also knew that his message to the delegates would set the tone for his national campaign.452

The final reason was that Franklin Roosevelt understood how important his appearance was towards allaying rumors and fears about his health and fitness for the demands of the


452 Brands, Traitor to His Class, 251-253; Daniels, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 105-106; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal, 73; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph, 312-314; and Morgan, FDR, 354-356.
presidency. Roosevelt sought to silence any skeptics or critics who whispered about Roosevelt’s paralysis and limitations; as in 1924, he composed and rehearsed his speech to highlight his buoyant attitude and remarkable energy. Roosevelt understood that the moment was portentous, a way to take the reins of the Democratic Party for good and to reintroduce himself as a national figure capable of beating the president at the polls in November. Roosevelt had used similar circumstances eight years before to seize the spotlight for personal promotion: in 1924, he understood that most of the attention around his nominating speech centered on his recent disability and he used the added drama and press coverage to provide the consensus highlight of the disastrous convention. Now, eight years later, as he was on the brink of securing his own nomination, he again seized the spotlight and used the moment to his advantage.453

The acceptance speech at the 1932 Democratic Convention was the culmination of Franklin Roosevelt’s political career and what all of his machinations in the Democratic Party had been building towards. It was the quintessential Roosevelt speech: self-effacing, outwardly humble, filled with platitudes, and commanding. From the outset, Roosevelt positioned his mere presence as historic: “The appearance before a National Convention of its nominee for President...is unprecedented and unusual, but these are unprecedented and unusual times.” He continued, and demonstrated to the convention crowd, Democratic leaders, and voters throughout the country, listening to the proceedings on radio, that he would be a candidate and president who was different from all who came before: “I have started out on the tasks that lie ahead by breaking the absurd traditions that the candidate should remain in professed ignorance of what has happened for weeks until he is formally notified of that event many weeks later. My friends,

may this be the symbol of my intention to be honest and to avoid all hypocrisy or sham, to avoid all silly shutting of the eyes to the truth in this campaign. You have nominated me and I know it, and I am here to thank you for the honor.”

With that introduction, Franklin Roosevelt successfully cast himself in historic and singular terms. Adding to the drama of a presidential nominee showing up at a convention, Roosevelt drew a line of demarcation for all who were listening: there were presidential candidates who came before, from both parties, and now there was Franklin Roosevelt. Both parties had participated in the exercise Roosevelt now referred to as a sham and exposed to the American people as a fruitless and outdated charade. He was billing himself as the only man, in either party, willing to defy the status quo to effect the changes that were needed. This was a risky move, as he was casting his own party as a willing participant in the fracas, and spoke as though he transcended not just politics as usual, but Democratic Party politics as usual. He continued, enjoining the party to follow his lead: “Let it be symbolic that in so doing I broke traditions. Let it be from now on that the task of our Party is to break foolish traditions. We will break foolish traditions and leave it to the Republican Party leadership, far more skilled in that art, to break promises.”

Roosevelt continued, clearly demonstrating that he was not just altering a single convention practice, but the entire approach to politics and governing. In the next section, Roosevelt consolidated all of the battles over the Democratic Party’s ideological identity and created his enduring vision of what the party should be (with the appropriate amount of

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{454}} \text{“Franklin Roosevelt 1932 Acceptance Speech,” Rauch, Roosevelt Reader, 69-74; Black, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 238-239; Davis, FDR: The New York Years, 334; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal, 73; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph, 314; Houck and Kiewe, FDR’s Body Politics, 83-86; Neal, Happy Days Are Here Again, 311; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 312-313.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{455}} \text{“Franklin Roosevelt 1932 Acceptance Speech,” Rauch, Roosevelt Reader; Black, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 239; Houck and Kiewe, FDR’s Body Politics, 86-87; Neal, Happy Days Are Here Again, 312-313; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 313.} \]
vagueness): “As we enter this new battle, let us keep always present with us some of the ideals of the Party: The fact that the Democratic Party by tradition and by the continuing logic of history, past and present, is the bearer of liberalism and of progress and at the same time of safety to our institutions.” Later, he continued to lay the groundwork for the Democratic Party’s purpose: “Ours must be a party of liberal thought, of planned action, of enlightened international outlook, and of the greatest good to the greatest number of our citizens.”

Roosevelt also included an appeal to Republicans disillusioned by President Hoover’s failure to remedy their plight, stating that he would not denigrate the Republican Party, but, rather, “Republican leadership.” He reached out to “nominal Republicans who find their conscience cannot be squared with the groping and the failure of their party,” and served a warning to “nominal Democrats” who relied on past traditions and refused to meet the present need. He stated for Democrats that they should be “a party of liberal thought, of planned action, of enlightened international outlook, and of the greatest good to the greatest number of our citizens.” This was completely in line with the way that Roosevelt presented his ideas in the Circular Letter and other communication, filled with positive, unifying rhetoric and few specific details.

In a telling section of Roosevelt’s acceptance speech, he claimed that he had spent years preaching that “government costs too much.” He offered that he would immediately “abolish useless offices. We must eliminate unnecessary functions of government...” He did not elaborate, and instead spent several minutes talking about the plight of farmers throughout the Depression

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in a clear pivot to looking at the audience as a collection of special interests (in this case, farmers) and not the traditional binary between lifelong Democrats and Republicans. With this, Roosevelt demonstrated that he understood Democrats could not remain reliant on the same voting bloc as in previous decades. Yet, in demonizing the large size of the federal government under Hoover and the Republicans, Roosevelt was seizing on a criticism that would soon be leveled against him as he changed the relationship between the American people and the federal government permanently. 458

Franklin Roosevelt closed his acceptance speech with a line that resonated throughout his presidency: “I pledge myself to a new deal for the American people. Let us all here assembled constitute ourselves prophets of a new order of competence and of courage. This is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms. Give me your help, not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people.” 459

The incumbent Hoover barely campaigned, and Franklin Roosevelt was cautious about his messaging as he toured the country. He stuck to his script, cribbing mainly from the acceptance speech’s platitudes, a hybrid of the campaigns from the previous election cycles where the Democrat toured the country and the Republican provided press releases and little more. 460 Roosevelt gave one speech in San Francisco that tipped his hand regarding the way he viewed the changing role of government (and stood contrary to what he had said at the Chicago


459 “Franklin Roosevelt 1932 Acceptance Speech,” Rauch, Roosevelt Reader; Black, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 239; Davis, FDR: The New York Years, 335; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal, 73; Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph, 315; Houck and Kiewe, FDR’s Body Politics, 90-92; Neal, Happy Days Are Here Again, 312-313; and Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 314.

460 See Roosevelt’s other famous 1932 speech, “The Forgotten Man,” which was repeated throughout the campaign; the speech was filled with platitudes and an earnest attempt at conveying to the American people that he knew their plight; Rauch, Roosevelt Reader, 65-69; Schlesinger, Crisis of the Old Order, 416-417; and Tugwell, Democratic Roosevelt, 218.
convention). Throughout the campaign, he alternated between promising to balance the budget and reduce the federal expenditures with promises to create federal relief programs and public works projects. In the Commonwealth Club speech, Roosevelt posited that the government had stood by for too long as ambitious and cunning men took advantage of hardworking Americans; like his famous cousin, Roosevelt was drawn to the idea that the government could be used to level the playing field. This speech was given little attention at the time, but stands, alongside his acceptance speech as a slight preview of Roosevelt’s ideas of governing.461

After twelve years of Republican presidents and a stagnant government response to the Great Depression, Roosevelt did not need to go into detail on the campaign trail to convince the American voting public that he would be a better steward than the now-reviled Herbert Hoover.462 Franklin Roosevelt won the 1932 presidential election in overwhelming fashion, gaining 57.4% of the popular vote and carrying the most states since directly after the Civil War (Roosevelt won every state except Pennsylvania, Delaware, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont). Roosevelt’s success importantly helped expand the Democratic Party’s voting bloc from the Solid South to include all sections of the country, particularly rural and underprivileged voters. Roosevelt also won more African American voters than any Democrat before; four years later, in 1936, African American voters sided with the Democratic Party for the first time, a permanent exodus from the Republican Party and the party’s realignment was complete.463

462 Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy*, 215-240.
Roosevelt’s zeal for party control left him open for criticism, most of it fair, especially on whether he put himself before the party. Three incidents point to this potentially troubling development. The first, the Democratic purge of Congressional opponents, occurred when President Roosevelt announced that he would only support Democrats in reelection bids who pledged fealty to Roosevelt’s New Deal programs. This was a gradual process: in 1934, Roosevelt viewed the midterms as a referendum on the First New Deal, and he mainly stayed above the political fray besides his pointed Fireside Chats; he went so far as to ask organizers to change the traditional Democratic Party Jackson/Jefferson dinners to nonpartisan events.

By 1936, however, he claimed leadership not just of the executive branch, but of his party, and wrote that he was charged with the responsibility of the “liberal declaration of principles set forth in the 1936 Democratic platform.” In 1938, he was actively campaigning against interparty opponents. This had the effect of wiping out any dissention from Democrats in two branches of the government and creating a power structure built on patronage and fealty. Though men like Father Coughlin or Huey Long were able to launch successful criticisms against the New Deal, the net effect was that Roosevelt had near-universal acclaim in Congress. This backfired when, in 1938, he issued the same edict, and Democrats suffered large defeats nationwide, jeopardizing the party’s standing in Washington. The second incident was Franklin Roosevelt’s infamous court-packing scheme of 1937, when he proposed adding justices to the Supreme Court. Roosevelt couched his proposal in an interest in justices’ health and acclimation to changing times, but critics and the public were roundly critical of a president who sought to undermine a third branch of government amidst their criticisms of some of his New Deal programs.464

Finally, Roosevelt’s refusal to leave office in 1940 arrested the Democratic Party for nearly a decade. He maneuvered to ensure that his unprecedented third nomination would be met with acclaim at the convention, but also effectively eliminated an entire generation of new party leaders who were forced to abide his leadership in the name of electoral success. In 1948, Harry Truman, his vice president and successor (after Roosevelt’s 1945 death, mere months after taking the Oath of Office for a fourth time), dealt with the party’s deep divisions, long festering under Roosevelt’s twelve-year rule in the fractious 1948 Democratic Convention. To Roosevelt’s mind, however, these incidents of party dominance reflected his success and ability at using the Democratic Party much as his cousin Theodore had used the Republicans, as an electoral weapon and base of power.

Franklin Roosevelt’s election as president in 1932 was the culmination of a process that began in earnest eight years before, when he assumed the reins of the Democratic Party and began charting a reformation of the party with his 1924 Circular Letter. His contribution to the Democratic Party during this period was in providing quiet but steady leadership, most notably in the way that he framed the appeal of the party. Franklin Roosevelt understood how to communicate ideas in terms that resonated with delegates and other leaders, but also, importantly, with voters. He understood that voters were not as interested in minute details and


remedies, but rather, they favored strong and effective rhetoric that demonstrated that their leaders understood voters’ plight.

True political leaders leave a long-lasting legacy. In The History of American Electoral Behavior, Walter Dean Burnham, Jerome M. Clubb, and William Flanigan wrote about political leaders who presented symbols to the voters: “The combination of crisis, issues, policy response, and political leaders creates, furthermore, a symbol around the realignment which also alludes to perceived explanations for the crisis.” In their example, Roosevelt’s New Deal and Social Security Act were examples of Roosevelt seizing on a situation and providing remedy in a vital way for voters. This was a process that he learned, not from political scientists or strategists, but from a process that began with the Circular Letter: respondents were not so concerned with any one answer, but the idea that their leader understood their plight and was prepared to offer some solution. In the realignment period, Roosevelt was the exact leader to take advantage of Republican apathy and Democratic hunger for leadership, and he won large mandates on his ability to offer solution.465

Roosevelt viewed his party’s history as a struggle between dominant personalities, and focused on how he could dominate the dialogue without sacrificing his integrity and amiability. He was skilled at this process: able to diagnose how the Democratic Party’s policies and traditions hobbled their candidates, and systematically remove each nonessential practice to avoid obsolescence. Franklin Roosevelt was the architect of the Democratic Party’s reformation and the beneficiary, and he used his party’s rancor as an opportunity to mold its future. With his election, he ushered in a distinctly new period in American history (making permanent the role

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of the presidency that his cousin Theodore and Woodrow Wilson had first suggested), where the president dominated the federal government, and he left his mark on nearly every facet, department, and branch. Notably, he was able to accomplish the largest overhaul of the federal government and spending massive amounts of money and extending the government into all sections of Americans’ lives, all while maintaining high approval ratings and electoral success in an unprecedented four consecutive elections. The Circular Letter and Franklin Roosevelt’s subsequent correspondence opened the dialogue between party leaders, delegates, and voters, and Roosevelt used his power to become one of the most influential presidents and established his party as a national party for good.
CONCLUSION

Franklin Roosevelt remains one of the most captivating public figures of the twentieth century, even while he remains largely unknowable on a personal level. While much of Roosevelt’s presidency was outsized (his approach to governing; control of Congress; refusal to leave after two terms; unilateral approach to national security), his return to prominence and triumph over his near-fatal attack remains under-appreciated. Franklin Roosevelt’s position in the Democratic Party was by no means certain when he was laid low by his polio attack and paralysis, and he might have failed into relative obscurity, a footnote famous more for his popular cousin than for any political contribution. Instead, Franklin Roosevelt seized upon a moment of great confusion for the Democratic Party and provided the necessary leadership to eventually lead the Democratic Party back to dominance, and resurrected his political career as a singular and efficient politician, leader, and president.

The Democratic Party went through difficult moments after Franklin Roosevelt—most famously, with the fractious 1968 convention that paired an ugly police confrontation with young protesters on the streets of Chicago with a divided party, still reeling from the assassination of Robert Kennedy, on the convention floor. Post-Watergate, the Democratic Party was able to reclaim the White House on Jimmy Carter’s promise to never lie to the American people, but he ceded power to the Reagan Revolution, with the Democrats winning just one presidency in six elections. But Franklin Roosevelt provided the framework for Democrats to connect with their constituency and identify the needs of their voters, eventually building a coalition that embraced minorities and consistently pushed for the government to serve as benefactor—marked by Social Security and the alphabet agencies under Roosevelt; Truman’s expansion of Social Security, low income housing, and education benefits under the Fair Deal; Eleanor Roosevelt’s own service to the new United Nations, where she served as first delegate from the United States; Kennedy and
Johnson’s New Frontier and Great Society efforts to expand on the New Deal initiatives with Civil Rights legislation, Medicare and Medicaid, and Head Start; and Bill Clinton and Barack Obama’s efforts to preserve Social Security, reform the welfare system, and codify a national affordable health care system.

At the conventions, Franklin Roosevelt’s imprint is still seen. He accepted his nomination in person, duly disposing with the antiquated tradition of candidates staying removed from the convention proceedings. Every Democrat after Roosevelt attended the convention and delivered the acceptance speech in person; Wendell Wilkie broke the tradition for Republicans eight years later in 1940. Now, the active candidates are all engaged in the most minute details of the convention, selecting surrogates to make the most of the prime-time television slots, and having the week culminate in their acceptance speech, replete with family and running mate, theme song, and red, white, and blue balloons and streamers dropping from the convention ceiling. The distance between political candidates and their party delegates and local and state officials disappeared, a reflection of the new political reality, where politicians are indebted to their party apparatus instead of the reverse.

As president, Franklin Roosevelt melded his responsibilities with the role of party leader. While today, the combination is commonplace, Roosevelt transformed the relationship through his expansive and controlling vision of presidential power. This intertwining endured long after his presidency, with presidents and even failed nominees seen as the de facto party leader, with the actual chairperson of the respective parties left to run the organizational apparatuses. Presidents direct the party policy, and campaign for and support those who will help in the legislature, but this process mainly began with Franklin Roosevelt and his insistence on electing a Congress who supported his agenda.
The relevance of Roosevelt’s party leadership has become more intriguing as the Democratic and Republican Parties faced the prospect of a contested convention in 2016, even when primary and caucus contests determined pledged delegates instead of party bosses. For the Republican Party, a significant bloc opposed to millionaire businessman Donald Trump’s candidacy threatened to make the convention a slug-fest. The runners-up, Texas Senator Ted Cruz and Ohio Governor John Kasich, stayed in their contests as long as possible, and both kept their delegates even during the roll call votes. Cruz refused to endorse Trump in a prime-time speech, instructing his and all delegates to “Vote your conscience,” while Kasich refused to participate in the convention in any capacity. At the Democratic Convention, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton held off Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, but Sanders vowed to try to convince delegates on the convention floor of his viability as the nominee. Eventually, he gave in and made the motion for Clinton’s nomination to be declared by delegate acclamation, a conciliatory gesture. For both parties, the conventions ran much more smoothly than portended, but the specter of a contested convention, like 1924 was raised once again. Indeed, the convention was mentioned multiple times for how fractious the proceedings were and how it damaged the party’s nominee.466

All of the articles and recounts of the 1924 Democratic Convention disaster failed to mention the leader waiting in the wings. Franklin Roosevelt seized on the moment, parlaying his heightened profile from his dramatic reappearance after illness and recovery. Roosevelt used his Circular Letter to control the Democratic narrative and to communicate directly with party

faithful and leaders in a way no candidate, in either party, was doing. Roosevelt asked in his *New York Herald* review of Claude Bowers’ *Jefferson and Hamilton*, “Hamiltons we have...is there a Jefferson on the horizon?” Beginning with his Circular Letter, and culminating in his election as president, Roosevelt, like Jefferson before, began transforming his party to fit his vision.

The process of transforming the Democratic Party was a difficult one, and the impact of the Circular Letter on Franklin Roosevelt’s presidency is difficult to ascertain. Roosevelt was always willing to put action and emotion before tradition and consensus, and his seizure of the Democratic Party and his presidency was marked by unilateral decision-making. While the result was successful in the short-term, and Roosevelt remained popular throughout his presidency and relied on his mostly-satisfied base, there were always growing pains for his Democratic Party. Clearly, his attempts at party unity could not have anticipated the Great Depression and the amount of voters who would clamor for a change of leadership at the moment when Roosevelt’s star was on the rise. Far from simply the beneficiary of good fortune, Roosevelt understood how to capitalize on the moment and push through a slew of social programs that helped put millions of unemployed to work. In the process, those who benefitted from the New Deal became indebted not just to Franklin Roosevelt, but to the Democratic Party, and the makings of a long-term political coalition was born.

The Circular Letter of 1924 has not been detailed in many monographs about this period in the Democratic Party’s history and in Franklin Roosevelt’s life. While Franklin Roosevelt writing the Circular Letter did not get him elected president, it established him as one of the few Democrats who were paying attention to the party faithful at their lowest moment. His commitment to maintaining correspondence helped Roosevelt appear selfless, and his political
career thrived, especially as so many Democrats viewed him as a solid party operator and not as opportunistic as he actually was.

The Circular Letter is also vital to understanding the Democratic Party at this critical point. While there is a wide array of scholarship on the party during this period and the disastrous convention of 1924, this is the first to interrogate the responses and impact of the Circular Letter. The Letter provided delegates and party leaders with an opportunity to vent and offer criticism and suggestions, providing a completely different narrative than simply recounting the activities and quotes of major figures like McAdoo, Smith, or Davis. Examining the responses provides a wider spectrum of the concerns for many in the party, and an idea of how the party’s essential participants viewed their party and its growing fissure.

Just as the 1924 Democratic Convention provided a historical example of a party on the brink, both parties could benefit from taking stock of the aftermath. The 2016 conventions revealed party fissures, with the “Never Trump” contingent decrying the Republican nominee and the “Bernie Bros” interrupting several speakers for the Democrats. Both parties will have to reconcile the segments who protest and who consider leaving the party over the nominee. Both parties have to think about how their party nominees reflect not just regional and issue-based concerns, but also a growing generational divide: more young voters are politically independent and ambivalent about the major parties’ power over elections. Both parties will need to examine how to stay relevant, preserve traditions, and build coalitions for future electoral success.

Most importantly, just as Franklin Roosevelt posed over ninety years ago: Hamiltons both parties have...is there a Jefferson on the horizon? The Democrats of the 1920s benefited from having Franklin Roosevelt waiting in the wings, seeking to capitalize on his party’s unrest to provide a calming hand and a vision for its future. For both the Republican and Democratic
Party, the 2016 election will not provide clarity, but likely further confusion: Who is taking stock of the party’s concerns? Who is the party leader? Who is providing a vision for the party’s future? If nothing else, both parties could take a page from Franklin Roosevelt by paying attention to the voters at all levels, and balancing the concerns of its partisans with the promise of party unity and shared tradition. The venerable Republican and Democratic Parties both share long histories, torrid divisions, and disparate blocs, and reconciling the party’s differences often comes at a cost, whether of electoral success or a lack of coherent policy (as when a bloc like “New Democrats” of the 1990s or Tea Party Republicans in the 2010s get elected but then have trouble placating the disparate constituencies who elected them). As the Democratic Party of the 1920s demonstrated, a party can go through a terribly divisive election and start building towards the future, especially with a figure like Franklin Roosevelt working to bridge divisions and finding common ground to rebuild the party for electoral success.
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## APPENDIX A. CIRCULAR LETTER CHART

Chart of Circular Letter Responses by Region and Topic

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Note: This chart divides the responses the 1924 Franklin Roosevelt Circular Letter. Only substantive responses were recorded (those containing merely a greeting, or other personal information but nothing of relevance to the issues contained in the Circular Letter or topics at hand were not factored in). Some letters contained multiple issues, and were recorded as such. While other topics were broached (some calling for a meeting of leaders, as discussed in Chapter V), each of the issues here received at least twenty substantive responses.