A Presidential Governorship: The FDR Years as New York Governor

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by

Rebecca Grudzinski

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This thesis will examine Franklin Roosevelt’s 1928-1932 Governorship of New York State, Roosevelt’s official return to public life after polio and paralysis. Polio taught Roosevelt about patience, courage, and suffering, and greatly impacted his approach to politics and people during his Governorship. In four years, Roosevelt progressively transformed New York, fully supporting his belief that government had the responsibility to maintain and protect the welfare of its citizens. Examination of Roosevelt’s Governorship will reveal that the New Deal of his presidential administration was not really all that new, as it was largely based upon policies and practices he had enacted while Governor of New York. Ultimately, the Governorship was a critical test period for Roosevelt in dealing with his disability, the press, and politics, and it proved to the nation and himself that he was capable to assume the presidency.
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When Franklin Roosevelt hung up the phone on October 1, 1928, he faced a difficult road ahead. The call was from Al Smith, Governor of New York and Democratic candidate for President, and he had just persuaded Roosevelt to be a Democratic candidate for Governor of the state.\(^1\) While Roosevelt loved politics and his ultimate ambition was to follow in his cousin Theodore’s political footsteps, in 1928 he did not think himself ready for the job.\(^2\) A bout with polio had ravaged his body in 1921, leaving him paralyzed from the waist down, and he did not yet feel strong enough to reenter politics. His advisors were even more disturbed by his candidacy, believing that in a time of Republican strength and prosperity, Roosevelt’s decision to place his name on the ticket spelled the termination of his political career. Among his few supporters was his wife Eleanor, who felt that Franklin had maximized the extent of his recovery, and that his physical health and spirits would stagnate until he returned to public life.\(^3\) In the end, Eleanor was right. The Governorship became a reenergizing office for FDR and more importantly, it was a critical test period for handling his disability, political life, and the Depression that proved instrumental in his later service as President of the United States.

Roosevelt came from a privileged background. Born into the Hudson River gentry in 1882, he enjoyed an affluent lineage that allowed him to live a privileged youth, complete with an idyllic and healthy boyhood, doting parents, an attentive governess, and later, the best education at Groton and Harvard. From the beginning, Roosevelt’s identity was clearly fixed – he belonged to the upper-crust of society, and his education and
increasing social connections, which included trips to Europe and a meeting with President Grover Cleveland when Franklin was only five, were intended to prepare him to perpetuate the family tradition of elite, well-connected, and wealthy men. Although a proud admirer of his distant cousin, Republican Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin chose to assume his father’s political views by becoming a Democrat. With a famous name, jovial personality, and established social contacts, Franklin Roosevelt quickly achieved his early political aspirations. By 1910, Roosevelt held a Democratic seat in the Albany Senate and shortly into his second term in 1913, President Woodrow Wilson appointed him Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Roosevelt remained at the civilian post throughout the duration of Wilson’s presidency, journeying several times to Europe to witness the devastating effects of the Great War. In 1920, Roosevelt’s magnetic charisma and rising popularity in the Democratic Party placed him on the presidential ticket as James M. Cox’s vice-presidential running mate. While the pair led a valiant campaign promoting both the Great War’s successful outcome and President Wilson’s League of Nations as victories for the Democratic Party, the Democrats were decisively defeated by the Republican ticket of Warren G. Harding and his vice-presidential running mate, Calvin Coolidge.

Throughout his brief and impressive career, Roosevelt owed much of his success not only to his own political talents, but also to the political savvy of his close network of advisors. One of Roosevelt’s most trusted and loyal supporters was Louis McHenry Howe, a former newspaperman whom Roosevelt met in 1911 during his reelection campaign to the New York Senate. An asthmatic and chain smoker, Howe was less than five feet tall, with a severely wrinkled complexion, and a persistent disheveled and dirty
appearance. These qualities, coupled with his abrupt and bitter personality, often made him appear unapproachable and rendered his career as a journalist difficult and frustrating. Politically, however, he was brilliant, and after a brief 1911 interview with Roosevelt, Howe offered to advise his campaign, secretly believing that with his assistance Roosevelt would one day become president. Unaware of Howe’s lofty ambitions for him, Roosevelt accepted Howe’s offer of political aid because he was troubled by his poor reelection prospects due to a rift with Tammany Hall, the Democratic political organization. In the end, Howe helped Roosevelt win the 1911 election by teaching him valuable campaign strategies that connected him with voters and diminished the power of Tammany’s political machine. Pleased with the results of their partnership, Roosevelt soon made Howe one of his most trusted advisors, and utilized his skills during the Wilson administration, the 1920 national campaign, and throughout his Governorship.7

In 1921, a political scandal almost derailed Roosevelt’s career and came close to sabotaging his ambition of being Governor. Despite his recent political loss on the national stage, Roosevelt was still buoyant about his political aspirations and maintained many influential contacts within the Democratic Party. In the summer, the Roosevelt family spent a holiday at Campobello, their summer home located off the coast of Maine on Campobello Island. The vacation was particularly important for Roosevelt who, although absent from elected office, was seeking political respite from Republican accusations that he had ordered a morally inappropriate investigation while Assistant Secretary of the Navy. While Roosevelt had authorized the misconduct investigation in question, he was unaware of the inappropriate execution of his orders and was denied the
opportunity to respond to allegations that he had acted with “an utter lack of moral perspective.”[8] The final Senate report infuriated Roosevelt as it was clearly an attempt by the newly inaugurated Republican majority to derail Roosevelt’s rising political career.[9] Even more exasperating was the fact that the affair had been snatched up by the press and The New York Times was headlining the situation as a “Navy Scandal” with the implacable addendum, “details are unprintable.”[10] With more friends than foes in the public arena, the situation was quickly hushed, but it was only after it had cost Roosevelt much public embarrassment. Roosevelt’s escape to Campobello was a chance to spend time with his family and regroup his future political agenda as he tried to put the scandal behind him.

Illness, likewise, came close to ending his political aspirations. At Campobello, Roosevelt maintained a vigorous lifestyle, taking Eleanor and the children boating, running, and swimming during the day, and working on political matters far into the night. One evening shortly after his arrival, Roosevelt succumbed to a strange sickness with symptoms of a high fever, exhaustion and great pain in his legs and back. Later he recalled “I’d never felt quite that way before.”[11] He awoke the next day, never able to walk again. As soon as word reached him about Roosevelt’s illness, Howe traveled to Campobello to ascertain the severity of the situation and prevent unfavorable information from leaking to the press.[12] Still uncertain of the illness’s diagnosis, Eleanor and Howe kept Roosevelt quarantined at Campobello, while summoning a Boston physician and sending a decoy news dispatch to the press claiming that Roosevelt was recovering from a severe case of influenza. Instead of influenza, Roosevelt had contracted a case of infantile poliomyelitis that had permanently damaged his lower body’s nervous system.
In 1921, little was known about the ravaging effects of polio, and Roosevelt’s cheerful attitude several months after the fevers subsided led several doctors to predict that he would make an almost complete recovery. But Roosevelt’s situation was much more serious than he was willing to concede, even though for the rest of his life he held the belief that he might someday walk again.13

For Eleanor, Franklin’s polio came at a critical period in their marital relationship. Her discovery in 1920 of a packet of love letters to Franklin from her secretary Lucy Mercer, had ended the romantic side of their marriage, and in 1921, aside from a mutual interest in their children, Eleanor and Franklin were leading separate lives. Since his early Harvard days, Franklin had mentally planned the future road through the Governorship to his presidency. His wealth, charisma, education, speaking abilities, family pedigree, and connections to the best society all added to his confidence that he was destined to assume the lofty political position. Polio, however, presented him with an impediment he had not anticipated. In order to achieve his high political aims, he now needed Eleanor’s help.14

Eleanor helped him recover and consider the Governorship once again. Before 1921 Eleanor participated in social and women’s issues in an arena almost always separate and less public than her husband’s endeavors. Throughout Franklin’s recovery from infantile paralysis, Eleanor continually encouraged him to remain interested and engaged in politics. Much of this encouragement came at the direction of Howe, who had been at Roosevelt’s side since the early days of his illness at Campobello.15 Although Eleanor was not fond of Howe – she deplored his manners, speech, appearance, and attitudes – she realized the potential of politics as a large component of Roosevelt’s recovery. As a result, she overlooked her dislike and arranged visits for Roosevelt with
Howe, who still relentlessly believed in Roosevelt’s political future. Howe also realized the importance of Eleanor’s role in Roosevelt’s political recovery and encouraged her to join many women’s political associations. According to Eleanor, “I was pushed into the women’s division of the Democratic State Committee, not because Louis cared so much about my activities, but because he felt they would make it possible for me to bring into the house people who would keep Franklin interested in state politics.” While politics were in the Roosevelt blood, Eleanor was not a natural public speaker. She was shy and vulnerable, and her high shrill voice had a tendency to giggle when she became nervous. Howe helped Eleanor practice effective speech making and coached her on controlling the nervous giggles that often affected her public speaking.

Eleanor readily adapted to her new role, no doubt seeing it as a way to salvage the irreparable breach in the Roosevelts’ martial relationship. She worked extensively for approval of women’s issues, and under Howe’s direction, helped campaign for Smith’s 1924 campaign to keep Franklin involved in and aware of Democratic developments. Although Eleanor supported Smith’s candidacy, she was critical of his character and treatment of Franklin: “There are two kinds of snobbishness. One is that of the man who has had a good many opportunities and looks down on those who lack them. The other kind is rarely understood, that of the self-made man who glories in his success in overcoming difficulties and admires greatly people who have achieved the things he considers of importance. Governor Smith had a great deal of respect for material success, but he tended to look down upon a man like Franklin…” Both Howe and Eleanor realized the vitality that politics inspired in Franklin and used it to their advantage as an effective component of his recovery. Politics was one of the few interests Franklin and
Eleanor shared, and Franklin’s growing dependence on Eleanor for political information fostered the emergence of a strong political partnership.\textsuperscript{20}

In a curious way, Roosevelt’s political success – Governor and later as president – rested on changes he experienced while sick. Although Roosevelt rarely acknowledged his disability, it is evident in the accounts of many who knew him before his illness that paralysis changed him significantly. Francis Perkins, a New York Democrat who made Roosevelt’s acquaintance long before working intimately with him in New York and Washington, had unfavorable first impressions of his character: “he didn’t really like people very much and…he had a youthful lack of humility, a streak of self-righteousness, and a deafness to the hopes, fears, and aspirations which are the common lot.”\textsuperscript{21} According to Perkins, Roosevelt’s sickness generated in him a “spiritual transformation” that “purged the slightly arrogant attitude he had displayed on occasion before he was stricken.”\textsuperscript{22} Stated more mildly by Eleanor, “Franklin’s illness proved a blessing in disguise, for it gave him strength and courage he had not had before. He had to think out the fundamentals of living and learn the greatest of all lessons – infinite patience and never-ending persistence.”\textsuperscript{23} Others who met him after his illness, such as Samuel Rosenman, Roosevelt’s most prolific speechwriter while Governor, also shared the opinion that paralysis affected him: “I have no doubt that the suffering and pain and physical handicap of many years of paralysis intensified his understanding of the problems of those suffering from the pain of hunger and destitution, and deepened his sympathy for those handicapped by poverty and ignorance and suffering from social injustices.”\textsuperscript{24} Roosevelt himself was fully aware of his personal metamorphosis, confiding once to Perkins, “You know, I was an awfully mean cuss when I first went into
Roosevelt’s experience with his own personal suffering enabled him to understand the hardships of those in need and produced a determination to improve the lives of others that shaped his Governorship and later his presidency.

While polio had forced Roosevelt to officially abandon political office for several years, it did not discourage him from making several key political appearances which helped keep his career afloat prior to his bid for the Governorship. The most important occasion occurred in 1924, when Roosevelt called Smith a “happy warrior” in a speech nominating him for Governor of New York. Some observers noted Roosevelt’s wan appearance as he struggled in his braces to get to the podium, but his expansive smile and resonant voice produced favorable press reports which allowed him, as his cousin Theodore often said, to “keep his hat in the ring.” Smith won the election and Roosevelt continued his support, nominating him for reelection to the Governorship in 1926.

Roosevelt’s efforts did not go unnoticed and in 1928, Governor Smith, the Democratic Presidential nominee, looked to Roosevelt to take his place as Governor of New York. While Roosevelt had name recognition and political experience in the state legislature and in Washington, many voters in New York felt he could not compare to Al Smith. This assessment, coupled with the national prosperity that was credited to the Republicans, led Howe and many of Roosevelt’s advisors to see his gubernatorial candidacy as a risky decision.

Because Roosevelt had remained actively engaged in political issues during his illness, it did not take him long to form a platform after his abrupt and unexpected nomination for Governor. His 1928 campaign continued to promote many of the issues Smith had introduced, such as social reform and labor legislation, but his message to the
people was that government could and should do more. As predicted, Republicans swept the nation during the 1928 election, but Roosevelt won a rare Democratic victory, defeating his opponent by a mere 25,000 votes. Al Smith’s bid for the Presidency was not as successful. 28

On January 1, 1929, in his inaugural address, Roosevelt pledged the new administration’s support for cheap electricity, judicial reform, and farm relief, three important issues he felt Smith’s administration had unwisely neglected. 29 His focus on cheap electricity originated from the plight of many of his rural neighbors in Dutchess County who, according to the electric companies, lived in places so remote that it was too expensive and impractical to run electricity. 30 Roosevelt felt this was nonsense, arguing in his inaugural speech that the water power generating the electricity belonged to all residents of New York and no individual or corporation had the right to restrict its distribution. 31 Roosevelt’s interest in judicial reform was a departure from Smith’s ideas and policies, and sought to create an equal system for all citizens by eliminating corruption and abolishing practices that favored the rich. 32

Roosevelt’s notions about farm relief were also progressive. Before his inauguration, he established a temporary committee of experts to investigate the rural tax burden, as high farm taxes placed the rural population at an economic disadvantage compared to urban residents. 33 The committee determined that the burden on farmers could be reduced if infrastructure funds were obtained from a new tax on gas instead of being directly collected from the citizens in each county. In the old system, counties with high populations were taxed less as there were more people to fund improvements; rural counties were forced to pay higher taxes because of their smaller numbers. The
Introduction of the gas tax was predicted to generate $20,000,000 a year, and was considered more practical because it specifically taxed those who used the roadways most.\(^{34}\)

Because he felt that Roosevelt was indebted to him for the nomination and ultimately the Governorship, Smith believed he was entitled to a large role in gubernatorial decisions. Roosevelt, however, refused to be a puppet of the former administration. His dismissal of many advisors and workers whom Smith highly valued when Governor was a clear statement that he sought to forge his own political path. In particular, Smith was annoyed that Roosevelt decided to terminate the services of his secretary, Belle Moskowitz, who served as one of his most influential political advisors and was the driving force behind many of his social reforms and policies. Shortly after the election, Eleanor wrote Franklin, cautioning him about the possible dangers of retaining Smith’s secretary: “Don’t let Mrs. Moskowitz get draped around you for she means to be and it will always be one for you and two for Al.”\(^{35}\) Eleanor realized Moskowitz’s influence on Smith’s Governorship and believed that her continued employment in the Governor’s office would prevent Roosevelt from pursuing his own political agenda. Furthermore, Eleanor believed that Smith would attribute any political triumphs to Moskowitz’s advice and indirectly to himself. In another letter, dated several days later, Eleanor recommended the appointment of Francis Perkins as labor secretary, but added in conclusion, “these are suggestions…not opinions for I don’t want to butt in.”\(^{36}\) While Belle Moskowitz wielded significant political influence with Smith, it is clear that Roosevelt had his own powerful political ally in his wife Eleanor.
For two years Roosevelt worked tirelessly to complete his inaugural promises and other social reforms, such as quality hospital facilities, old age pensions, and improved labor legislation for women and children. But then the Depression intervened. The stock market crash of 1929 precipitated a crisis that led to rising unemployment, breadlines, and panic, all of which required him to reevaluate the full extent of government’s responsibility to the people. This was all the more important since Republican President Herbert Hoover was singularly unsuccessful at dealing with the Depression at the national level. Driven by a humanitarian vision he believed transcended politics, Roosevelt expressed his philosophy to the New York legislature: “it is of small importance who first points out the road to progress…all measures affecting the welfare of the state…[should]…be discussed frankly and fully between us, with no consideration on either side of partisan advantage.”37 The Depression had shattered the Republicans’ era of prosperity and Roosevelt realized that a strong reelection to the Governorship in 1930 would place him as the Democratic frontrunner in the 1932 Presidential election.38

In 1930 Roosevelt easily secured the Democratic nomination for reelection to the Governorship. Throughout the campaign, Republicans assailed Roosevelt with charges of Democratic corruption in New York City’s Tammany Hall and criticized his support to repeal Prohibition. Roosevelt responded with evidence of accomplishments on hospitals, farm relief, electricity, public works, prisons, old age pensions, and labor legislation that had occurred during his term.39 Realizing that he could not easily win the election without addressing the Republican accusations, Roosevelt developed a strategy to help him gain Republican votes while attacking his opponent, Charles H. Tuttle. Instead of holding all Republicans responsible for the Depression, Roosevelt blamed Republican
leaders alone. In his speech accepting the Democratic nomination, Roosevelt asserted, “Let me make it perfectly clear that in my judgment this Republican leadership does not represent the great rank and file of the men and women of this State who call themselves Republican…Lack of leadership at Washington has brought our country face to face with serious questions of unemployment and financial depression.”

Despite Tuttle’s recent discovery of graft and corruption within Tammany Hall, this strategy proved successful in gaining the Republican vote. Coupled with his farm relief efforts, which benefited many historically Republican districts, numerous upstate New Yorkers voted Democratic for the first time. Roosevelt won the election in a landslide and during his second term, his unconventional idea that it was the state’s responsibility to alleviate the Depression gained national attention by President Herbert Hoover and the press.

Roosevelt’s reputation grew as Hoover and his administration refused to acknowledge the severity of the situation, maintaining the position that once confidence in the stock market returned, the economy would revive. In January 1930, the New York Times published a front page story quoting Hoover discussing a sudden increase in employment and the improvement of many Americans’ economic situations. In reality, employment had once again plummeted and Hoover’s statements, instead of deriving from official employment reports, originated from his own wishful thinking and denial that the economic disaster could be ameliorated without governmental assistance. Angered by the false report and aware of the true facts, Roosevelt’s Industrial Commissioner, Perkins, issued a statement that laid bare the dire economic situation, without consulting Governor Roosevelt. The next day, Perkins was shocked as her statements made the newspaper headlines as the New York administration’s response to
the president. Believing she had caused a mess, Perkins reluctantly received a phone call from the Governor. To her surprise, Roosevelt was eager to issue congratulatory remarks: “Bully for you! That was a fine statement and I’m glad you made it…If you had asked me, I would probably have told you not to do it, and I think it is much more wholesome to have it right in the open.”“42 From that point forward, the public respected Roosevelt as a rare politician who told them the truth, and it became an approach that he continued beyond the Governorship.43

In 1930, New York’s unemployment rate was steadily increasing, and thousands of New Yorkers appealed to the Roosevelt administration to alleviate some of the hardship. In particular, communities unable to cope with the pending economic disaster sought emergency help and shared similar concerns: “Everybody is out of work. The people who had money have lost so much in the stock market that we have almost no one to appeal to for contributions. Our tax system won’t hold any more taxation.”“44 Still unsure of how to address the unemployment problem, Roosevelt established the Commission on Stabilization of Employment in order to search for possible means to educate the public and prevent future panic and unemployment outbreaks. After several months of discussion, the commission came to the progressive conclusion that the state should provide a means of unemployment insurance to protect the people from crises beyond their control. Because previous attempts to establish an unemployment insurance system on the federal level had been determined unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, and the cost of an insurance program constituted a sum much larger than a single state could afford, the commission sought to create an insurance system composed of several states.45
Roosevelt readily accepted the commission’s recommendation and began telephoning Governors in an effort to assess their thoughts. Due to the widespread effects of the Depression, most Governors were eager to discuss common employment problems, and Roosevelt invited many of them to Albany for an unemployment conference. Realizing that the Stabilization of Employment Commission’s data was not presentable in layman’s terms, the commission hired University of Chicago economics professor, Paul H. Douglas, to create a simplified discussion of unemployment for Roosevelt to present. While all Governors at the conference shared the same intent of helping his individual state, Roosevelt faced a more difficult task as he was in charge of leading this large group of his political equals. Fortunately for Roosevelt, the Governors responded readily to the simplification technique and realized that in addition to being extremely proficient in the commission’s material, Roosevelt was also equally interested in engaging other Governors in a conversation about their own state’s problems and concerns. According to Perkins, a principle member of Roosevelt’s Employment Commission, “this conference proved to be one of the highlights of his pre-presidential career. He disarmed his critics. He made his position clear and didn’t do all the talking or all the work himself.” The meeting was also important as it provided Roosevelt with much needed support when he presented the idea of unemployment insurance at the 1930 Conference of Governors in Salt Lake City. There Roosevelt addressed all Governors, and while his practical speaking and simplified analysis of the problem and possible solutions gained support from many, he was already building upon a broad network of support created by the earlier New York conference. Roosevelt’s concern for unemployment insurance in other states is the first publicly recorded instance in which he began to speak about the
Depression in national terms and attempted to produce a national solution. His power to effectively and easily communicate with the Governors did not go unnoticed, and Roosevelt emerged from his efforts to support unemployment insurance as one of the front-runners for the 1932 Democratic presidential nomination.48

By August 1931, the nation’s newspapers were full of reports about the coming winter, predicting longer breadlines and more unemployment than the year before. The press lost faith in Hoover and almost every publication criticized his inaction. It could no longer be concealed by the well-wishing president that economic improvement and employment were unreachable short-term goals. Hoover was stymied as to how to fix the national problem, and he still fully believed that government should not be responsible or accountable for regulating the economy. While Roosevelt’s push for unemployment insurance had been favorably received, little progress occurred in making it a reality and the idea of unemployment insurance was abandoned until his presidency. Like many throughout the nation, Roosevelt gave up hope of federal assistance, and on August 28, 1931, during a special convening of the Albany legislature, he informed the state government and people of New York that he was going to help.49

From the beginning of his tenure as chief executive of New York, Roosevelt envisioned a broader role for the government. He strongly advocated reforms to improve the welfare of New York’s citizens and attempted implementing minor unemployment services. Now was his chance to do more. Addressing a packed legislature, Roosevelt called for the allocation of $20 million and the establishment of a Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA).50 In a powerful statement attacking the government in Washington and speaking directly to the people of New York, Roosevelt declared, “it is
true that the Federal government may adopt a well thought out concrete policy which will start the wheels of industry moving and give to the farmer at least the cost of making his crop. The State of New York cannot wait for that. I face and you face and thirteen million people face the problem of providing immediate relief.”

TERA would employ citizens in large public works projects and also provide food and clothing in areas where public works projects were unavailable. In a nation impaired by a policy of inaction, Roosevelt’s words attracted the attention of citizens across the country.

The next day, the nation’s newspapers, previously consumed with speculating on the dire winter ahead, carried full copies of Roosevelt’s speech and intended plan. While the New York public was generally enthusiastic that a relief plan had been proposed, Republicans balked, stating that Roosevelt’s plan was merely an attempt to gain the 1932 Democratic nomination for the presidency. Insisting that they too agreed the state should provide assistance to the people, Republicans declared that their plan differed only because it advocated a much slower and less dramatic initial course of action.

After special hearings on the relief bill and slight modifications to Roosevelt’s initial proposals, newspapers began to report that party lines had been broken as Republicans began to support compromise relief measures. Less than one month after his address to the legislature on September 23, 1931, Roosevelt signed TERA into law. Shortly after, on October 12, Roosevelt presided over the ground breaking of TERA’s first major public works contribution, the Lincoln Tunnel under the Hudson River, which employed more than 10,000 workers throughout the winter. Three months after TERA’s enactment, nearly 10 percent of New York was receiving relief.
While Roosevelt was busy with TERA, Hoover and the federal government were at work putting together a “National Plan” for unemployment relief. Introduced September 6, 1931, a week after Roosevelt’s initial recommendation of TERA’s establishment, Hoover’s plan presented a nationally orchestrated state-relief solution. The plan called for the reorganization and expansion of the employment service of the Department of Labor, a public works program, and coordination of state and local relief through a central agency in Washington. Hoover claimed that Roosevelt’s New York initiatives were actually based upon policies he had been advocating throughout the Depression and that TERA’s concept was not entirely new. In fact, Hoover argued, TERA fit perfectly within the parameters of his National Plan.57

Discouraged with Hoover’s late extension of assistance, state governments began to copy New York’s relief program, taking a proactive stance in preparing for the tough months ahead. A survey of mayors from the nation’s largest cities revealed that many regarded unemployment and breadlines as a local responsibility their governments would have to endure. For many cities, federal aid was no longer a hope or an option; Hoover was too late.58 Hoover’s reluctant support for measures to combat the Depression caused citizens across the nation to become disillusioned with the federal government, and waning public support for his National Plan disintegrated after it was scathingly criticized by the press. Like many newspapers, The Washingtonian offered its own views about Hoover’s sudden development of a recovery plan: “The reason for Mr. Hoover’s speed – and even his severest critics admit that he worked fast – is the sudden realization on his part that some 10,000,000 people face unemployment and starvation this winter.
For...two years...he has been trying to put his finger on the reasons for the depression and simultaneously predicting that the upturn was just around the corner.

For the nation, Roosevelt’s resolute establishment of TERA and Hoover’s reluctance to act sooner (a result of his laissez-faire economic beliefs), provided a comparison that proved beneficial in the 1932 Presidential election. Whereas Hoover appeared aloof and removed from the nation’s problems, Roosevelt, according to his speechwriter Samuel Rosenman, “seemed to be on terms of close relationship with all the 12,600,000 people of his state.” During his Governorship, Roosevelt continually sought to increase the public’s understanding of government affairs and began to give short radio talks to encourage public awareness of legislative issues. While giving his radio talks, Roosevelt envisioned he was speaking to individuals and not the public en masse. Perkins, who was present for many of the radio speeches during the Governorship observed that, “his voice and facial expression as he spoke were those of an intimate friend...his face would smile and light up as though he were actually sitting on the front porch...with them...it was this quality that made the people trust him and do gladly what he explained it was necessary for them to do.” Rosenman also admired Roosevelt’s oratorical abilities, asserting that Roosevelt “was a master at presenting the most complicated matter in the most understandable terms.” Correspondence from listeners poured in after each brief radio message, many pertaining to how citizens could contribute to New York’s relief efforts. Among the thousands of people who wrote to the Governor were musicians, representatives of lumber companies and charities, and even children. The Hutchison brothers, two young boys extremely fond of baseball, telegraphed that they believed the two New York baseball teams, both finishing second
in their respective divisions, should play each other in a special game with all ticket proceeds benefiting the unemployed.\textsuperscript{63} While Roosevelt kept up to date on the volume of citizen correspondence arriving, most of the unemployment-related letters were forwarded to TERA’s director, Harry Hopkins.

Formerly the director of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association, Harry Hopkins, a thin lanky chain smoker with a sharp intellect, became executive director of TERA shortly after its inception. While the initial task at hand was daunting – the fair allocation of $20 million dollars over a six month period throughout all regions of the state – Hopkins masterfully organized the new program.\textsuperscript{64} When he discovered that many refused to accept government funds, believing that it was a family disgrace, he alerted Roosevelt, who immediately issued a public statement declaring that “society will have failed in its obligations if it allows [people] to suffer through no fault of their own.”\textsuperscript{65} TERA’s temporary status led Hopkins to retain connections to his previous job until it became clear that the organization was destined to be a more permanent fixture. By 1932, reports suggested that 1.5 million people were out of work in New York and it was doubtful whether the appropriated $20 million would last long enough to reach them all.\textsuperscript{66}

By March, all funds were depleted and Roosevelt sent an emergency message to the legislature, urging the appropriation of additional funds. According to the Work Bureau, while TERA had employed 75,000 New Yorkers in public works and provided 82,000 people with home relief, more than 112,000 still sought TERA’s aid.\textsuperscript{67} The legislature quickly went to work and after much compromise, $5 million in funds was skimmed from other programs in the state budget in order to fund TERA through
November 1932. At that time, the citizens would vote to decide whether or not they supported an additional $30 million in taxes to extend TERA and its policies until January 1, 1934. Unfortunately, due to high demand, the $5 million appropriated in March ran out two months before schedule and by November, 2 million people in New York were unemployed. Although the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration continued to be underfunded throughout the rest of its existence, Hopkins’ efficient management of the program’s funds led Roosevelt to appoint him as executive director of the Federal Emergency Relief Association (FERA) established during his first term as President.

Another significant development during Roosevelt’s Governorship that proved integral throughout his presidency was the formation in 1932 of the “brains trust.” As predicted, Roosevelt officially became a presidential candidate in late January 1932, and shortly afterwards, Rosenman approached him with the recommendation that he form a committee to discuss national issues and develop new solutions for many of the ongoing Depression problems. Roosevelt’s cautious agreement led Rosenman to select a group of professors from Columbia University who were loyal Roosevelt supporters. Members of the group included Raymond Moley, a former economic advisor to Governor Smith, Adolf Berle, a banking and law specialist, and Rexford Tugwell, an economics professor knowledgeable about agriculture. This group of men soon impressed Roosevelt and was nicknamed the “brains trust,” later shortened to “brain trust.” Roosevelt asked that they not inform others about their secret meetings and the information discussed, and they complied. Although the men rarely agreed on issues, their meetings created a dialogue about the Depression and possible methods to alleviate it effects. The “brain trust”
became an important asset during the rest of Roosevelt’s Governorship and bid for the presidency, helping him to write informative campaign speeches about promising approaches that had the potential to nationally assuage the Depression’s impact.\(^{70}\)

The Governorship was also pivotal in Roosevelt’s political career as it allowed him the crucial opportunity to balance his disability with an active political life and establish a successful rapport with the press before attempting to govern at the national level. Accounts from those who knew him best note that Roosevelt worried little about his disability and never submitted to self-pity. However, in reality, Roosevelt struggled often in coping with his paralysis. While his upper body was strong, he relied daily on people to lift him in and out of his wheelchair. For public appearances, Roosevelt had perfected the illusion that he could walk by concealing cumbersome leg braces beneath his trousers and leaning heavily on the arm of a strong man, often one of his sons. With this support he would then use his upper body strength to thrust his unresponsive legs forward while smiling and bantering happily with the crowd. Each public appearance in which he “walked” was carefully orchestrated and although the process caused him tremendous amounts of pain and physical exhaustion, his determination and courage persevered. Pressured by Republicans attacking his health and ability to represent the people, Roosevelt realized that his “walking” appearances were critical to convincing the public that he was an able and competent leader. At the same time, he was also fully aware that a public fall would ruin his political career forever. While the public knew that polio had left Roosevelt disabled, they were never informed of the extreme extent. Roosevelt’s positive rapport with the press produced a relationship of mutual respect, and throughout his life after polio they never photographed him in a wheelchair or wrote a
story about his paralysis. This respect allowed the public to focus on what was really important in a good Governor, and despite the Republican attacks on his abilities, those he met drew strength from his everlasting courage, and admired his determination to continuously achieve more and demand better for the people of New York.71

During the Governorship, Roosevelt’s compassion and ability to clearly articulate political ideas to the public led him to connect with the people. Perkins, who felt that paralysis had ingrained in Roosevelt a sense of suffering, believed that as a result he could identify with those struggling through the Depression for, “having been to the depths of trouble, he understood the problems of people in trouble.”72 Above all, he made people feel he was interested in them and his relentless campaign for social reform convinced the public that he was doing his best. Roosevelt was not afraid to experiment with social policies regarding the Depression and was willing to try any reasonable program in an effort to find one that worked well. According to Eleanor, “it was part of Franklin’s political philosophy that the great benefit to be derived from having forty-eight states was the possibility of experimenting on a small scale to see how a program worked before trying it out nationally.”73 A health report ordered by Roosevelt for the State of New York began with his comment that “the success or failure of any government in the final analysis must be measured by the well-being of its citizens. Nothing can be more important to a state than its public health; the state’s paramount concern should be the health of its people.”74 Consistently presenting the facts, Roosevelt admitted during his 1930 reelection campaign that Depression legislation alone could not save the people. Instead, each individual would have to acknowledge his responsibility to aid in the recovery before the legislation could work.75
Like the public, Eleanor also drew strength from Roosevelt during his Governorship, and traveled extensively with him, often going inside buildings that he could not access. Traveling by boat through the rivers and canals, the couple visited state institutions all over New York. After docking the boat, Eleanor immediately went inside to inspect conditions such as building repair, treatment of employees, and quality of food, while the head of the institution greeted Franklin at the dock and took him on an extensive tour of the grounds. Roosevelt taught Eleanor to be keenly observant, to make sure that the food cooked at a hospital was actually being fed to the patients, to look for signs of overcrowding, and to gauge patient and staff relations. These joint tours of state institutions helped further nurture their growing political relationship, as they were dependent on each other to create a complete picture of the institution. According to Eleanor, “Franklin often used me to get the reflection of other people’s thinking because he knew I made it a point to see and talk with a variety of people…Franklin used whatever I brought back to him…as a check against the many official reports which he received.” Roosevelt’s immense trust of Eleanor’s judgment was also noted by Perkins: “he often insisted on action that public officials thought unnecessary because Mrs. Roosevelt had seen with her own eyes and had reported so vividly that he too felt he had seen. They were partners.” Later during his presidency, this partnership was even more evident as Roosevelt sent Eleanor on similar missions throughout the country in an attempt to get an accurate depiction of Depression aid programs and their effectiveness.

Ultimately, the Governorship was the turning point in Roosevelt’s political career. Roosevelt’s enormous transformation politically and personally during this period attest that he would never have become president if he had not been Governor of New York.
His four years in Albany proved not only to the nation, but to himself, that he was more than a privileged aristocrat with a famous last name. During his Governorship, Roosevelt witnessed the impact his compassion had on the general public and he realized that the more people were informed about political affairs, the more likely they were to lend government their support. Roosevelt faced the Depression head on, speaking to the people about their needs and concerns and ascertaining how he could help. While Governor, he also became dependent on the opinion of Eleanor, and frequently asked her advice before making a final decision. Above all, he proved to himself – and to others – that his paralysis was not an obstacle. Roosevelt’s disability offered him a perspective on the unfortunate that his upbringing and previous political career had failed to provide and led him to form a new relationship with Eleanor that was essentially a political partnership. Overall, Roosevelt’s state stewardship is evidence that the New Deal of his presidential administration was not really so “new.” Instead it was based upon policies and practices he had implemented while serving as Governor of New York. Perhaps most importantly, Roosevelt carried with him to the White House the concept that government had the responsibility to maintain and protect the welfare of its citizens when they could not provide for themselves.
Notes

1 He was formally nominated as the Democratic Candidate for New York Governor on October 2, 1928.
2 Eleanor Roosevelt, This I Remember, (New York: Harper, 1949), 45.
5 Ibid, 224-305.
7 Davis, FDR: The Beckoning of Destiny, 286-293.
8 Jane S. Smith, Patenting the Sun (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 47.
12 Roosevelt, This I Remember, 29-30.
14 Ibid, 492-494.
15 Roosevelt, This I Remember, 29-30.
16 Davis, FDR: The Beckoning of Destiny, 669.
17 Roosevelt, This I Remember, 30.
18 Ibid, 32.
20 Ibid, 142-145.
22 Ibid, 29.
23 Eleanor Roosevelt, Autobiography, 142.
25 Perkins, 12. (Perkins remembering what FDR said)
26 Perkins, 37.
27 Cook, 371-376.
28 Cook, 371-376.
30 Rosenman, 34.
31 Franklin Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address, January 1, 1929.”
32 Ibid.
35 Eleanor Roosevelt to Franklin Roosevelt Nov 16, 1928. FDRL, Roosevelt Papers Donated by the Children Box 16, Folder 2
36 Eleanor Roosevelt to Franklin Roosevelt Nov 22, 1928. FDRL, Roosevelt Papers Donated by the Children Box 16, Folder 2
39 Rosenman, 42.
40 “Roosevelt’s Acceptance Speech, 1930.”
42 Roosevelt quoted in Perkins, 96.
43 Perkins, 97.
44 Quoted in Perkins, 100.
45 Perkins, 103-105.
47 Perkins, 106.
58 Ibid.
60 Rosenman, 52.
61 Perkins, 72-73.
62 Rosenman, 39.
63 Papers of Harry L. Hopkins Box 7.
64 McJimsey, 45-50.
65 Chairman Straus to Governor Roosevelt Jan 5, 1932. FDRL Governorship Papers.
66 Bellush, 143.
68 Bellush, 142-143.
70 Rosenman, 56-60.
71 Rosenman, 37.
72 Perkins, 10.
74 *Public health in New York State; report of the New York State Health Commission to His Excellency, the Honorable Franklin D. Roosevelt, Governor of the State of New York*. (Albany: State Department of Health, 1932).
75 Fusfeld, 170.
76 Ibid.
77 Eleanor Roosevelt, *This I Remember*, 3-4.
78 Perkins, 70.
79 Fusfeld, 170.