

## METHODIST MINISTERS, FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, AND THE NEW DEAL

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When Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated president on March 4, 1933, the United States was in the deepest economic depression in its history. Worsening conditions had forced numerous banks to close. The stock market was at low ebb. Industrial production was down to 56 percent of the 1923–1925 level. One wage-earner in four did not have a job to support himself or his family. Essentially no markets existed for farmers' income crops such as corn, cotton, tobacco, and peanuts.<sup>1</sup> Under such conditions, the congress passed hundreds of bills and appropriated large sums of money to attack the nation's problems. A vast bureaucracy sprang up to administer a multiplicity of agencies and programs.

On September 23 and 24, 1935, President Roosevelt mailed a form letter to members of the clergy in the United States, in which he asked them to give him their unbiased views about the operation of New Deal programs and about conditions in their local communities, as well as suggestions as to how the government could better serve the people of the nation.<sup>2</sup>

The number of clergymen in the United States in 1935 was about 200,000. The White House staff mailed the President's letter to 121,700 of the nation's clergymen, apparently to every minister, priest, and rabbi whose address was available. Slightly more than 100,000 letters reached the addresses, and approximately 30,000 clergymen responded to the president's query.<sup>3</sup> These clergymen were cognizant of public opinion about and reaction to the governmental attempts to respond to the myriad problems during the Great Depression. Their responses manifested wide varieties of socioeconomic, political, ethnic, and regional interests.

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<sup>1</sup>Maurice L. Farrell, ed., *The Dow Jones Averages, 1885–1970* (New York, 1972); William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1931–1940* (New York, 1963); Frank Freidel, *The New Deal in Historical Perspective* (Washington, 1959); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933* (Cambridge, 1957), 248–256.

<sup>2</sup>A copy of this letter is printed in Samuel I. Rosenman, comp., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (13 vols., New York, 1938–1950), Vol. IV, 370.

<sup>3</sup>These letters are housed in 81 archival boxes in the Clergy File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

Since Roosevelt himself was a Christian and a church member,<sup>4</sup> many Methodist ministers identified with him and felt obliged to give their honest, personal responses to the presidential inquiry. Deeply involved in the day-to-day lives of their parishioners, these clergymen were peculiarly qualified as observers of public opinion. An in-depth study of letters from the Methodist clergymen not only tells how they themselves responded but also indicates what the members of their congregations were thinking.

This study is based upon all the letters written by Methodist clergymen from a representative sample of nine states: Massachusetts from New England, New Jersey from the east coast, Ohio from the midwest, Alabama from the south, Texas from the southwest, Nebraska from the Great Plains, Montana from the Rocky Mountain region, Washington from the northwest, and California from the west coast. The total number of clergymen residing in these nine states who responded to the president's inquiry was 3,189. Unfortunately, 1,266 respondents did not indicate their religious affiliation. Of the 1,932 ministers who identified their denominations, 492 were Methodists. Accounting for 26 percent of all the responding ministers whose religious affiliation could be identified, the Methodists were by far the largest single group.

In 1936 the twenty-one Methodist bodies in the United States had a total of 7,001,637 members, 24 percent of these (1,712,827) living in the nine states in this study. The Methodists had 42,327 churches, 22 percent of them (9,132) located in the states in this sample.<sup>5</sup> Assuming one minister per congregation, the 492 Methodist clergymen who responded to the president's letter constituted slightly more than 5 percent of the total number of possible responses within the area of the sample. The breakdown of the responding Methodist ministers was: Texas, 131; California, 89; Ohio, 76; New Jersey, 52; Alabama, 46; Massachusetts, 41; Nebraska, 31; Washington, 20; Montana, 6.

All the 492 letters from the Methodist clergymen were ranked as to their general tone toward President Roosevelt and the New Deal on a five-point scale: (1) very unfavorable, (2) unfavorable, (3) neutral, (4) favorable, and (5) very favorable. Table 1 shows that these clergymen were supportive of the New Deal by a margin of 58 percent with 20 percent neutral. This

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<sup>4</sup>For information on Roosevelt's association with and membership in the Protestant Episcopal Church, as well as his religious thought, see Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship* (Boston, 1952), 20, 81ff.; James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York, 1956), 29, 237, 452ff.; Rex G. Tugwell, *The Democratic Roosevelt: A Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (Garden City, N.Y., 1957), 30-33, 502; Thomas H. Greer, *What Roosevelt Thought: The Social and Political Ideas of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (East Lansing, Mich., 1958), 3-11, 24.

<sup>5</sup>United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies, 1936, Denominations K to Z* (Washington, 1941), Vol. II, Part 2, 1082-1234.

Table 1  
Overall Attitude Toward FDR and the New Deal

	Number Clergy	Percentage
Very Unfavorable	14	3%
Unfavorable	92	19%
Neutral	98	20%
Favorable	254	51%
Very Favorable	34	7%

favorable percentage occurred between FDR's nationwide support in the 1932 and 1936 presidential elections, in which he received 57 percent and 61 percent, respectively, of the total votes cast.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Methodist clergy support of the president may be viewed as an indicator of not only Methodist congregations but also the nation's total population.

The overall 58 percent approval rate no doubt indicated that the Methodists liked the New Deal because of their intellectual and professional commitment to social services and because of their firsthand experience with deadening poverty in both rural and urban areas. But a careful reading of their letters for both their tone and specific comments revealed that their support mainly devolved from the reality of economic deprivation, not social theory.

A number of Methodist clergymen were effusive in their support for the president. A typical response came from a Texas minister, who wrote: "I am amazed at how nearly the social legislation of the government parallels the teachings of Jesus. The government seems to be actually incorporating the spirit of brotherliness in its program."<sup>7</sup> But Roosevelt had severe critics. Representative of those critical of the President and the New Deal was a minister from Ohio: "The most I can do for my country is to pray for its release from the hands of those who do not know where or how they are going."<sup>8</sup>

The fact that the Methodist clergymen were, on balance, favorably inclined toward the New Deal is admittedly hardly astonishing. What is more significant is their relative interest in the various issues associated with the New Deal and FDR and the quite substantial variations which occurred in the clergymen's degree of support for or opposition to specific issues. Thus, each of the Methodist preachers' letters has been subjected to analysis in terms of the specific issues mentioned in them. For this analysis, each response on each issue has been coded (1) highly unfavorable, (2) unfavorable, (3) favorable, or (4) highly favorable.

<sup>6</sup>See Richard M. Scammon, comp. and ed., *America at the Polls, A Handbook of American Presidential Election Statistics, 1920-1964* (Pittsburgh, 1965), 7, 9.

<sup>7</sup>Jos. I. Patterson to FDR, Oct. 31, 1935, Texas Clergy File. (This letter and all subsequent letters referred to in this essay are in the Clergy File, Roosevelt Library.)

<sup>8</sup>Harry Lyon to FDR, Oct. 9, 1935, Ohio Clergy File.

The subjects of these letters were surprisingly concentrated in a few issues. Out of twenty-three issues which the ministers specifically mentioned, six of them were cited so few times that they were not statistically significant. Of the remaining seventeen, Social Security was by far the most salient issue, as a resounding 62 percent of the clergy mentioned it. The repeal of Prohibition was second at 41 percent, and the public works programs were third at 32 percent. Relief programs, bureaucracy and corruption, agricultural policies, budgets and debt, and certain activities of the president's family members were the other subjects discussed by at least 10 percent of the preachers.

Another interesting characteristic of the analysis of the specific issues is that almost none of the issues evoked anywhere near an even division of opinion, all but one having either over 71 percent or under 24 percent approval. Rather surprisingly, most of the issues—eleven of the seventeen which drew comments from at least fifteen clergymen—were perceived negatively, despite the overall support of the New Deal. Only Social Security, public works programs, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Recovery Administration, the regulation of public utilities, and the munitions embargo during the Italian-Ethiopian war elicited positive responses from the Methodist churchmen. Thus, while the clergy generally approved the principal policy thrust of the New Deal, they leveled substantial criticisms at particular facets of the Roosevelt program.

A better appreciation of this can be gained by considering the issues in four specific groupings. The first group includes government programs aimed at helping particular parts of the American population; the second group concerns issues of morality; the third group focuses on perceived governmental abuses; and the fourth group touches on foreign policy issues. Tables 2 through 5 summarize the Methodist clergy's positions on these subjects by presenting the number and percent of preachers commenting on an issue and the percent of these comments that could be considered favorable.

Table 2  
Clergy Perceptions of Governmental Help Policies

Issue	Number Citing	Percent Citing	Percent Favorable
Social Security	305	62%	86%
Public Works	157	32%	71%
Relief Program	123	25%	20%
Agriculture Policies	84	17%	24%
Civilian Conservation Corps	34	7%	88%
National Recovery Administration	30	6%	50%
Regulation of Public Utilities	15	3%	73%

Table 3  
Clergy Perceptions of Moral Issues

Issue	Number Citing	Percent Citing	Percent Favorable
Repeal of Prohibition	202	41%	1%
President's Family	49	10%	0%

Table 4  
Clergy Perceptions of Government Abuse

Issue	Number Citing	Percent Citing	Percent Favorable
Bureaucracy/Corruption	93	21%	1%
Budgets and Debt	59	12%	2%
Taxes	39	8%	10%
Constitutionality	30	6%	20%
Restrictions on Business	15	3%	13%

Table 5  
Clergy Perceptions of Foreign Policy Issues

Issue	Number Citing	Percent Citing	Percent Favorable
Munitions Embargo	30	6%	93%
Armaments Expenditures	25	5%	12%
Recognition of Russia	15	3%	13%

At the most general level, the New Deal aimed to restore the American socioeconomic system to normal operating order and particularly to provide immediate aid to those suffering from the severe dislocations of the Great Depression. The Methodist clergymen who wrote to FDR commented on seven specific topics concerning governmental programs attempting to implement these goals: Social Security, public works programs, relief programs, agricultural policies (especially the Agricultural Adjustment Act), Civilian Conservation Corps, National Recovery Administration, and the regulation of public utilities. The data in Table 2 indicate that the preachers had quite different perceptions of these issues, strongly favoring four, strongly disapproving two, and dividing equally on one.

Social Security was an almost universally popular program. It was by far the most salient issue, being mentioned by nearly two-thirds of the Methodists in the total of the nine states in the sample, and it elicited an 86 percent approval rating. Clearly, the clergy deemed its potential beneficiaries, particularly children, the aged, and the disabled, well worthy of

solicitude. From a practical standpoint, these groups often represented the preachers' own parishioners hardest hit by the Depression. The clergy's approval closely reflected general public opinion. Between 1936 and 1940 repeated surveys showed that over 90 percent of the citizenry supported Social Security and old-age pensions.<sup>9</sup> A Massachusetts minister responded simply, "I am heart and soul for the Social Security Act."<sup>10</sup> Despite the overwhelming support for the Social Security legislation, positive reaction to it was not unanimous. A clergyman from California made his position clear in a single, unambiguous sentence: "As a Minister and student of God's word I am bitterly opposed to the Social Security Legislation."<sup>11</sup>

One-third of the Methodist clergymen made references to the New Deal's public works programs, and nearly three-fourths of those expressed support. Most of these favorable comments focused upon the provision of aid to and regained dignity for the participants, rather than the broader economic impact of the projects. To be sure, the works programs did not receive unanimous approval. A minister from Massachusetts represented many of these dissenters' opinions when he stated that "too many 'bums' and nominal 'unemployables' receive aid and work while the thrifty are being penalized."<sup>12</sup>

The majority views expressed by the Methodist clergy about public relief were quite different from the majority views expressed about public works programs. Relief programs were quite salient since 25 percent of the ministers mentioned them, ranking them fourth in overall importance. But relief was not at all popular: 80 percent of the clergymen who commented on it did not approve. Evidently most of these churchmen were imbued with a strong Protestant work ethic. They believed that the dole would make people lose their initiative and that easy government money would encourage indolence and laziness. But one-fifth of the clergy commenting on relief were acutely aware that government handouts had prevented many Americans from starving to death; they favored temporary relief measures for moral and humanitarian reasons. From a hard-hit rural area of Texas a minister wrote that a large number of people "both white and colored" were "unable to provide for themselves" without government relief funds.<sup>13</sup>

The New Deal directed much attention to the problems associated with agricultural regions. Since most of the states in the sample were quite rural, surprisingly only 17 percent of the ministers mentioned agricultural policies or problems in their letters to the president. Even more surprising was that FDR's agricultural initiatives were quite unpopular: they received

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<sup>9</sup>Rita James Simon, *Public Opinion in America, 1936-1970* (Chicago, 1974), 25, 27.

<sup>10</sup>Herbert F. Randolph to FDR, Sept. 25, 1935, Massachusetts Clergy File.

<sup>11</sup>O. E. Laird to FDR, Oct. 21, 1935, California Clergy File.

<sup>12</sup>G. Albert Higgins to FDR, Sept. 25, 1935, Massachusetts Clergy File.

<sup>13</sup>E. W. Summers to FDR, Sept. 26, 1935, Texas Clergy File.

only a 24 percent level of support. While some of the commenting writers believed that more aid was needed to combat the heartbreaking conditions which continued to exist in the nation's farmlands, the great majority simply could not fathom the morality or economic efficacy of killing pigs and plowing under crops at a time when widespread hunger and even starvation stalked America. A pastor from a Great Plains state wrote, "There is a deep conviction that the limiting [sic] and destroying of crops is both un-American and un-Christian."<sup>14</sup>

The Civilian Conservation Corps, a program to put unemployed young men to work helping to conserve the nation's natural resources, received the attention of a small portion of the Methodist clergy. The combination of the CCC's employing young men who otherwise could not find jobs, of massive and effective conservation programs (especially in the American West), and of an agency that was well administered, caused it to receive an approval rating of 88 percent, even higher than the Social Security program. A Los Angeles minister commented: "Your C.C.C. program is generally highly commended. It is a fine step in social conservation."<sup>15</sup>

The National Recovery Administration, designed to provide temporary government regulation of the nation's businesses in order to speed national economic recovery, drew comments from 6 percent of the clergymen, one-half approving, one-half disapproving. Even though the NRA had been declared unconstitutional and had been disbanded, some preachers were sorry the program was no longer operative. An Ohio preacher credited the NRA with a great deal: "The N.R.A. logically paved the way to the administration of public utilities, the conservation of natural resources, and the direction of coordinated transportation facilities in the interest of all the people."<sup>16</sup> A minister from Nebraska expressed a contrary view when he wrote that "the whole system of the NRA, 'Blue Eagle,' etc. has done more harm than good."<sup>17</sup>

The Methodist ministers gave a 73 percent approval rating to the New Dealer's efforts to regulate the activities of public utilities for the benefit of all the people they served. From the state of Washington came this response: "Some form of federal control over public . . . utility interests must prevail to satisfy the standards of justice."<sup>18</sup>

Table 3 shows that the Methodist clergy, as their calling would suggest, were concerned about moral issues. This was obvious in their comments about the repeal of Prohibition. Methodists had a long tradition

<sup>14</sup>M. M. Long to FDR, Sept. 30, 1935, Nebraska Clergy File.

<sup>15</sup>Willisie Martin to FDR, Nov. 19, 1935, California Clergy File.

<sup>16</sup>Charles W. Harrison to FDR, Oct. 11, 1935, Ohio Clergy File.

<sup>17</sup>C. E. Austin to FDR, Oct. 31, 1935, Nebraska Clergy File.

<sup>18</sup>W. W. Switzer to FDR, Oct. 5, 1935, Washington Clergy File.

of opposition to the drinking of alcoholic beverages. When Prohibition was ended, the occasion brought forth a great outburst from the clergy. Indeed, concern for liquor was the ministers' second most salient issue, nearly one-half of them referring to that subject. Ninety-nine percent of them were critical of FDR's support of repeal, many not only opposing repeal but also blaming the return of legalized alcohol for all manner of social problems on the American scene. For many of them the president was directly responsible for these undesirable developments. A minister from Montana wrote of the "shame and disgrace" of legalized liquor. He considered the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment "one of the outstanding tragedies of the twentieth century."<sup>19</sup>

As part of the nation's clergy, the group most likely to be considered the moral guardians of American society, the Methodist ministers in this sample made no favorable comments on the subject of the divorces of the president's children. More than one reminded Roosevelt that his sons were violating God's law and that the president's family members were obliged to set an example for the general population. A midwestern minister made a point for many when he wrote, "The moral mandate of a Christian people expects a rigid adherence [sic] of the residents of the White House to the principles of our forefathers as to religious standards of living, in matters of . . . marriage vows."<sup>20</sup>

This moral ire carried over into intensive opposition against what the ministers perceived as governmental abuses and excesses. On the five issues of bureaucracy and corruption, larger government budgets and debt, excessive taxation, perceived violations of the Constitution, and permanent restrictions on business enterprises, the Methodist clergy were strong in their opposition, as indicated by the data in Table 4.

Concerns about bureaucracy/corruption caused that issue to be ranked fifth in salience among the seventeen issues which the Methodist clergy mentioned. While ministers in all nine states expressed displeasure about the existence of bureaucracy and corruption, those in Texas, New Jersey, and Ohio ranked highest in terms of unfavorable percentages. Perhaps these concerns about corruption reflected a displeasure with state politics, since those three states had long traditions in machine politics and questionable patronage practices.<sup>21</sup> From an urban area in New Jersey came the sentiment that "it is of utmost importance that all graft be delt [sic] with most severely."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>E. D. Swisher to FDR, Oct. 7, 1935, Montana Clergy File.

<sup>20</sup>Kenneth S. Learey to FDR, Oct. 22, 1935, Ohio Clergy File.

<sup>21</sup>Dayton David McKean, *The Boss: The Hague Machine in Action* (Boston, 1940); Rupert Norval Richardson, Ernest Wallace, and Adrian N. Anderson, *Texas: The Lone Star State*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1981), chaps. 17 and 18; and Peter W. Porter, *Cleveland: Confused City on a Seesaw* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976), chaps. 3-5.

<sup>22</sup>David Otis Cowles to FDR, Sept. 30, 1935, New Jersey Clergy File.

Despite Roosevelt's promise in his 1932 presidential campaign to balance the nation's budget, the New Deal programs drained the national treasury and plunged the nation deeper into debt. Twelve percent of the clergymen commented upon the government's policy in regard to budgets and debt, and 98 percent of these respondents were critical of the trend toward unbalanced budgets and burdensome national debt. A west coast minister reported that "there is a growing spirit of bitterness and rebellion against the amazing and iniquitous extravagance involved in relief experiments."<sup>23</sup>

Since government spending was resulting in these massive deficits, the New Dealers proposed new taxes to help the government pay for some of its expenses. Ninety percent of the Methodist clergy who commented on the taxation policies were critical. A Californian reported that "multitudes now stand aghast before the tidal wave of taxes."<sup>24</sup>

The question of the constitutionality of the New Deal measures concerned thirty of the Methodist ministers. Among the 80 percent who opposed the New Deal's apparently unconstitutional approach to solving the nation's problems was one who wrote that there was "a growing suspicion that constitutional traditions are being set aside."<sup>25</sup> But not all ministers were so critical. One-fifth of them supported FDR as he tried to solve economic woes, arguing that his actions in regard to the Constitution were justified. Criticizing those who criticized the president, a minister from Los Angeles acknowledged their attacks upon FDR's attitudes toward the Constitution, indicating that "their efforts are as throwing eggs against a stone wall."<sup>26</sup>

Although one-half of the Methodist ministers who commented upon the National Recovery Administration favored the work of that agency as a temporary solution to some of the nation's economic problems, some of the ministers commented upon the more general question of government relations with business, 87 percent of them opposing permanent government restrictions on private enterprises. Typical was one minister who wrote, "The growing emphasis upon governmental interference in business and industry . . . is provocative . . . of wide-spread disregard for law and order."<sup>27</sup>

A number of Methodist clergymen showed interest in foreign affairs. Thirty discussed Roosevelt's munitions embargo in the Italian-Ethiopian war; twenty-five mentioned the nation's arms expenditures; and fifteen commented upon the United States' relations with the Soviet Union. The munitions embargo almost surely attracted attention because it was imposed

<sup>23</sup>C. B. Sylvester to FDR, Oct. 4, 1935, California Clergy File.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>Sai Yong Whang to FDR, Nov. 8, 1935, *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup>H. D. Hawver to FDR, Sept. 26, 1935, Massachusetts Clergy File.

during the same week that most of the clergy were receiving their letters from President Roosevelt. Table 5 shows that the respondents who commented on the embargo almost universally approved it, and those who wrote about increased armaments and diplomatic recognition of Russia were strongly opposed. More than one minister who praised the munitions embargo in the Italian-Ethiopian war suggested that such embargoes should be used against any nations at war. Others believed that armaments reduction was another way to avoid war. One wrote, "I would like you to be fearless in the use of your opportunity and authority as Commander-in-Chief for the prevention of war and the disarmament of nations."<sup>28</sup>

With the Russian Revolution of 1917 nearly twenty years in the past and with Joseph Stalin firmly in control of Soviet Russia and talking about the spread of Communism throughout the world, the ministers expressed unhappiness that the United States had diplomatically recognized that expansive country. Reflecting the opinions of many others, a minister from Houston offered this direct advice to the president: "Sever relationship[s] with Soviet Russia and clean house of any Pinks and deport Red propagandists."<sup>29</sup> Underlying these foreign policy comments were an anti-communism militating against diplomatic relations with the USSR and a pacifism causing support for the arms embargo and opposition to increased defense spending and war.

In conclusion, Methodist clergymen from all sections of the United States displayed a remarkable consensus about the New Deal. They realized that the grave economic and social disruptions accompanying the Great Depression called for the American government to take radical remedial actions. Thus, they strongly supported several key elements in the New Deal which attacked the Depression at the local level and helped the recovery of many destitute Americans. These clergymen, however, were far from blind or unthinking New Deal loyalists. They deplored policies which they perceived as promoting personal immorality among their parishioners, such as the repeal of Prohibition, "easy money" from the dole, official immorality, and mismanagement in government. They supported the New Deal, but not without significant reservations. The Methodist ministers of the 1930s were pragmatic and undoctinaire about the New Deal and the role of government in the daily lives of individual Americans.

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<sup>28</sup>W. H. Stephens to FDR, Oct. 18, 1935, Nebraska Clergy File.

<sup>29</sup>Eddie Arthur Peterson to FDR, Sept. 30, 1935, Texas Clergy File.