

Then: Broadcasting the Presidency

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will focus on how presidents began taking their message directly to Americans. With the advent of the radio, and later television, presidents didn't need to rely on newspapers to spread their message; they could broadcast their messages directly to the country. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Broadcasting the Presidency



BEFORE YOU START

How have new broadcast technologies changed the way politicians communicate?

1. Broadcasting the Presidency

Before the invention of broadcast technology, the only way political leaders could directly address constituents was either through writing or by giving speeches that could only be heard by the people who were physically present (though these were also circulated widely in print). Broadcast technology has dramatically changed the way modern politicians get their messages across—starting with the invention of the radio.

The first president to have his voice transmitted by radio was Warren G. Harding, in a 1922 broadcast heard by around 125,000 people. A mere three years later, President Calvin Coolidge broadcast a speech over the radio that reached over 23 million people (History.com, 2020). Radio let presidents address people all around the country instantaneously, without difficult travel and without their voices being drowned out by a crowd.

Franklin D. Roosevelt is known for having mastered the use of radio for political communication. He began by delivering radio broadcasts, later referred to as “fireside chats,” that let him take advantage of the new technology to share his ideas directly with millions of Americans as they sat in the comfort of their own living rooms.

Roosevelt gave over 30 **fireside chats** throughout the course of his presidency. They usually lasted around 45 minutes or less and focused on a single topic. Here is an excerpt from Roosevelt's second fireside chat outlining some of the details of the New Deal (Roosevelt, n.d.).

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Radio Address

Author: Franklin D. Roosevelt

Year: 1933

On a Sunday night a week after my Inauguration I used the radio to tell you about the banking crisis and the measures we were taking to meet it. I think that in that way I made clear to the country various facts that might otherwise have been misunderstood and in general provided a means of understanding which did much to restore confidence.

Tonight, eight weeks later, I come for the second time to give you my report—in the same spirit and by the same means to tell you about what we have been doing and what we are planning to do....

The legislation which has been passed or in the process of enactment can properly be considered as part of a well-grounded plan.

First, we are giving opportunity of employment to one-quarter of a million of the unemployed, especially the young men who have dependents, to go into the forestry and flood prevention work. This is a big task because it means feeding, clothing and caring for nearly twice as many men as we have in the regular army itself. In creating this civilian conservation corps we are killing two birds with one stone. We are clearly enhancing the value of our natural resources and second, we are relieving an appreciable amount of actual distress. This great group of men have entered upon their work on a purely voluntary basis, no military training is involved and we are conserving not only our natural resources but our human resources. One of the great values to this work is the fact that it is direct and requires the intervention of very little machinery.

Second, I have requested the Congress and have secured action upon a proposal to put the great properties owned by our Government at Muscle Shoals to work after long years of wasteful inaction, and with this a broad plan for the improvement of a vast area in the Tennessee Valley. It will add to the comfort and happiness of hundreds of thousands of people and the incident benefits will reach the entire nation.

Next, the Congress is about to pass legislation that will greatly ease the mortgage distress among the farmers and the home owners of the nation, by providing for the easing of the burden of debt now bearing so heavily upon millions of our people....

By design, Roosevelt's tone in this address is conversational and familiar, making the speeches feel "off the cuff" and intimate—but that doesn't mean Roosevelt delivered these speeches spontaneously. He understood the power of speaking to so many Americans at once, so his radio addresses were very carefully scripted and rehearsed. He appreciated the effect his words would have and carefully honed his message to get his point across exactly as he intended to (Sterling, 2002).

Roosevelt used these communications to reassure the country and provide hope during the terrible difficulties of the Great Depression and World War II. He recognized the importance of a new technology and used an agile mindset to take advantage of it.



TERM TO KNOW

Fireside Chats

Evening radio addresses given by President Franklin D. Roosevelt between 1933 and 1944.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that presidents, beginning with Warren Harding, adopted the radio as a means of **broadcasting the presidency** because it had several distinct advantages over earlier methods of communication. You then read and analyzed President Roosevelt's use of the radio to deliver his "fireside" chats to the nation.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

REFERENCES

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