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"The Good of the Country Rises Above Party": Roosevelt, La Guardia, and O'Connor and the Works Progress Administration in New York City During the Great Depression

Kristine Avena

On May 6, 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 7034 to create and appropriate federal funds for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during the Great Depression. This work relief agency had two major purposes: "to operate a nationwide program of 'small useful projects' designed to provide employment for needy employable workers and to coordinate the activities of the 'Work Program.'"¹ In the struggle to implement this agency, public officials faced severe challenges that pushed them to adopt unconventional methods to help their constituencies. Roosevelt and the Republican mayor of New York City, Fiorello La Guardia, worked together despite their different political party affiliations. These public servants utilized their personal and political relationship to institute New Deal programs in New York City. However, New York Congressman John J. O'Connor, a member of Roosevelt's own party, did not participate in this political cooperation. Instead, O'Connor obstructed New Deal initiatives, particularly the WPA, and often worked passionately against the President and the other New Dealers. With Roosevelt and La Guardia working across party lines and government levels, and O'Connor ardently opposed to their efforts, the WPA endured a political seesaw. Despite the dominating party polarization over the New Deal during the Great Depression, the alliance between Roosevelt and La Guardia against O'Connor over the WPA in New York City was exceptional because it demonstrated an instance in which ideology triumphed over party.

Work relief was the federal government's solution to the economic disaster of the Great Depression. It was an effort to provide the unemployed with jobs and help restore their sense of dignity by giving them wages. Historians have long argued about the political consequences of work relief within the New Deal's WPA. Richard Polenberg, a noted biographer of President Roosevelt and an expert in political and legal history, explained how the politicization of work relief was not a new phenomenon. He shared how conservative politicians believed that "there is only one issue in the O'Connor district and that issue is the New Deal vs. anti-New Deal."² Polenberg's study emphasized the incendiary conflict between those who supported and opposed the New Deal, often to the detriment of those politicians in places where the New Deal was popular. Shawn Kantora, Price Fishback, and John Wallis, from the National Bureau of Economic Research, analyzed how the New Deal solidified Democratic majorities in Congress and strengthened the Democratic Party for the next two decades. They argued that "the New Deal did contribute to the ascendancy of the Democratic party after the 1930's."³ Their research focused on how the Democratic Party enjoyed political success and built new political coalitions through their work on the New Deal.⁴

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This historical study focuses instead on the atypical alliances and unexpected hostilities that emerged from the implementation of the WPA. Utilizing primary source material from the Records of the WPA from the National Archives, the 73rd to 75th Congressional Records from the Library of Congress, the *John O'Connor Collection* from Chapman University, and the *O'Connor Papers* from Indiana University, it analyzes the higher politics of work relief through the lens of a single federal agency. It demonstrates the importance of political relationships in the creation and implementation of the WPA in New York City by examining three public officials from different parties and government levels. This study highlights two diverse political responses that emerged from the New Deal – one that embraced the WPA and one that opposed its purpose. Most importantly, this study emphasizes the significance of a rather unknown and overlooked figure in American politics, Congressman John O'Connor. His political opposition to the WPA symbolized the passionate resistance that emerged from the conservative Democratic faction in Congress during the Great Depression.

Prior to and during the 1930's, the Democratic and Republican parties were deeply divided on major issues facing the nation. The norm was to rally behind the party's platform and support leaders within the party.⁵ This tradition within politics often led to animosity and resentment between Democrats and Republicans. Leon Keyserling, an economic historian of the New Deal, argued that "when the New Dealers found to their surprise that no program could unite everybody and that those who in some ways had benefited most were turning to bite the hand that fed them, they shifted from the political strategy of unity to the political strategy of division."⁶ New Dealers were intensely partisan during the Great Depression. Rather than uniting the two parties, the New Deal became the scapegoat for further contention and discord. Through this massive federal effort, the Republican and Democratic parties discovered new means to partake in bitter political fights and separate themselves from each other's policies and actions. New York Governor Al Smith, Roosevelt's predecessor as governor, remarked in his 1929 autobiography that the "Republican party, for thirty-five years, in each succeeding presidential year has resorted to the false and misleading issue of prosperity," characterizing Republicans as "hypocritical, un-American, and undemocratic."⁷ Because of this party polarization, Roosevelt and La Guardia's bipartisan relationship was thus rare and unprecedented.

Major changes in the Democratic Party also exacerbated political partisanship. Ira Katznelson, a political scientist and historian, explained how the Depression benefited Democrats tremendously. Before the midterm election of 1930, the composition of the House included 218 Republicans and 216 Democrats. After the election, the House consisted of 311 Democrats and a mere 117 Republicans.⁸ Matters only got worse in the "partisan transformation of 1932."⁹ These massive changes drastically altered the manner in which political officials voted and worked with their colleagues. With only a small number of Republicans, they were now forced to stay united against their opponents. The significant increase in the number of Democratic legislators threatened the interests of Republicans in the House, greatly intensifying the divide between the two political parties. Furthermore, after more than a decade of Republican Presidents, the Democratic Party yearned for a President of their own. This thirst for leadership, along with the socio-economic consequences of the Depression, resulted in a welcoming Congress for Roosevelt when he was elected in 1932. The large majority of Democrats in the House played a significant role in accelerating the passage of New Deal legislation. During the first session of the 73rd Congress, it took merely forty hours of debate to pass eleven key bills in the House – remarkably expeditious for a legislative body with the size and composition of Congress.¹⁰ Democratic Congressman O'Connor, however, was different because he did not conform to this model of party loyalty to Roosevelt.

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The WPA made Roosevelt a national hero when it was formed in 1935. An article in *Forum and Century*, a magazine dedicated to solving the economic calamity that was the Great Depression, was even entitled, "They Love Roosevelt."¹¹ In this article, Richard Neuberger interviewed two citizens and wrote that they "both expressed the same sort of faith in the President: a belief in his sincerity and in his devotion to the people and no tendency to put on him any blame for mistakes or failures. And both referred to him as 'our President.'"¹² Because Roosevelt exuded a sense of trustworthiness and integrity, he achieved a personal connection with the American public. This connection allowed the people to put faith in their President to enact changes that would help alleviate their dire economic conditions. Perhaps one of the most telling statements of Roosevelt's effect on the American people was when Neuberger shared the story of his friend's mother. His friend explained that "my mother looks upon the President as someone so immediately concerned with her problems and difficulties that she would not be greatly surprised were he to come to her house some evening and stay to dinner. She almost regards him as one of the family."¹³ Through his work on the WPA and the New Deal more generally, Americans viewed Roosevelt as one of them; as a leader who was directly concerned with their well-being and prosperity. He made such an impression on them that they were not hesitant to put their trust in his legislation, even if they were not knowledgeable about the specific features of each program.

The average American citizenry's admiration for the President also played a vital role in how Republicans and conservative Congressmen portrayed Roosevelt to the press and to their constituents. Neuberger wrote that "this is the new strategy of Republicans and conservative Democrats alike. The politicians have sensed a tendency among the people to detach Mr. Roosevelt from any objectionable New Deal features."¹⁴ Rather than insulting the President, his opponents, including those who were targeted by the President to be ousted from the Democratic Party in 1938, often tried to attach themselves to Roosevelt's popular persona in order to score political points. Even during the process of being ousted from his party, Governor Martin of Oregon "distinguished between the noble leader and such 'incompetent federal officials.'"¹⁵ Senator George of Georgia also surprised his state when he described Roosevelt as "that great and good man."¹⁶ These examples portrayed the powerful effect of the "New Deal standard."¹⁷ This standard held that Roosevelt benefitted from being the main sponsor of the New Deal and had the ability to use this standard to help him win another victory for a third term. The American public's faith in Roosevelt and his program showed how effective public opinion was in advancing the policymaking process during the 1930's. Even Roosevelt's opponents were aware of the political ramifications that would come from criticizing the President.

La Guardia, a liberal Republican, deviated from his Republican counterparts in that he enthusiastically supported the New Deal and its creator. The personal and political relationship between La Guardia and Roosevelt defied the typical partisan rancor between Republicans and Democrats over the New Deal. They recognized that through their collaboration on the WPA, they could exhibit their political achievements to the American people. La Guardia even admitted that "reputations have been built on what the WPA made possible for New York City."¹⁸ The two public servants were cognizant of the status they could attain with the successful implementation of this federal agency. It represented a shift from past politics in that La Guardia and Roosevelt not only openly flaunted their roles in helping the people of New York together, but also exhibited a natural liking for one another. They defied the divisive political climate and worked cooperatively in order to advance the WPA in New York City.

There was no question that Roosevelt and La Guardia had a soft spot in their hearts for one another. For instance, in a letter from Democratic leader Peter McGuinness to La Guardia, he wrote that "I know the

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President thinks the world of you. [...] He said to me, 'Peter, he is a great man and my pal.'"¹⁹ Roosevelt, previously the governor of New York, not only had a special connection to New York City, but also its mayor, La Guardia. It was a peculiar sight in the political arena during the 1930's – the leader of the nation and Commander in Chief exhibiting his favorable point of view towards the mere head of New York's City Hall. The disparity between the prestige of their positions made this unseemly couple even more noteworthy. The President's high view of La Guardia was extremely important due to the great implications it had for New York City. In fact, Roosevelt even endorsed La Guardia's reelection and declared, "I do not hesitate to express the opinion that Mayor La Guardia and his Administration have given to the City the most honest and, I believe, the most efficient municipal government of any within my recollection."²⁰ Roosevelt's willingness to interfere in this municipal election demonstrated the level of trust he had in the Italian mayor and the importance he placed on their political relationship for the future of New York. His belief in La Guardia's "honest and efficient" governance were powerful descriptions in emphasizing his confidence in the New York Mayor's capabilities.²¹ This odd Democratic-Republican relationship illustrated the new shift in politics. It demonstrated the willingness of public officials to work across party lines and through governmental levels for the betterment of the nation.

Despite their party labels, La Guardia and Roosevelt shared an immense amount of similarities in their governance. Perhaps the most noteworthy was their shared vision for New York and the nation. Both the president and mayor "sought to leave the physical condition of the nation and the city better than they had found it."²² Through the New Deal, they worked together to ensure New Yorkers and Americans alike enjoyed jobs, recreation, culture, arts, and education.²³ They fervently believed in advancing the welfare of the nation through governmental action. Furthermore, their ultimate aim was to promote happiness by using the "power of government."²⁴ The term "happiness" ran through their rhetoric frequently, further emphasizing their similar vision for the people that they served.

Ever since La Guardia's time in Congress, he had been an avid supporter of the interests of labor unions. In contrast to O'Connor's political clout with Tammany Hall, the Democratic political machine in New York City, and private industry, La Guardia's political influence came from ordinary workers such as those from the WPA. One labor supporter even wrote that "no member of Congress has served more faithfully, loyally, and devotedly than Congressman La Guardia."²⁵ This demonstrated the mayor's commitment to labor throughout his career in public service. He sought to eliminate corruption and help improve the conditions of workers. La Guardia worked passionately for the benefit of WPA workers by demanding increases in WPA jobs and projects, defending the advantages of the program to political opposition, and funneling funds from the federal government through his relationship with President Roosevelt.²⁶

Through La Guardia's leadership and support of the implementation of the WPA, the work relief program not only flourished in New York City, but also became the blueprint for the nation to follow. La Guardia's progressive initiatives and his desire to maintain a relationship with the President earned him a significant advantage in the political climate at the time.²⁷ The mayor's deliberate decision to sustain his connection with Roosevelt proved vital in determining the success of the WPA in New York City. On President Roosevelt's birthday, La Guardia sent a telegram that reported, "you can count on New York City doing its part by following your splendid leadership in the great battle being waged against depression, poverty, and unhappiness."²⁸ Referring to initiating the programs of the New Deal, La Guardia emphasized his commitment to promote the popular program to the people of New York City. He assured the President that he would continue to be a loyal supporter of this federal program to help New Yorkers rise out of the draining Depression. Through their cooperation, the mayor and President achieved remarkable success for the society, economy, and politics of New York City.

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However, the WPA faced much political opposition from those who did not believe in its purpose. Political enemies, such as Congressman O'Connor and other conservative politicians, believed that the program did not cultivate skillful leaders and instead, condoned a government handout of jobs to help ease the effects of the Depression. The enemies of the WPA promoted the stereotype of the lazy worker who merely participated in useless projects to help the image of the New Deal. Mayor La Guardia, however, fought back and reaffirmed how the WPA was necessary in facilitating the recovery of millions of people in New York. He argued that "federal work relief had allowed Americans to retain their dignity and self-respect."²⁹ The mayor's respect for the program stemmed from his ideology that the WPA was genuinely the right solution for a city beat down by the Depression. While O'Connor believed that private business could solve the dire effects of the Great Depression, La Guardia placed his faith and efforts into the WPA. Their political differences demonstrated the various solutions that emerged from this decade of economic degradation. Their contrasting solutions to unemployment further represented the difficult position that political officials encountered in trying to serve their constituencies and the nation as a whole.

Working across party lines and government levels, Roosevelt and La Guardia participated in a symbiotic relationship that allowed them to benefit from one another in local and federal politics. Their alliance set a new standard for the level of cooperation possible between these two levels of governments. Harry Hopkins, the creator of the WPA, declared that "upon your local governments will rest a good many responsibilities. The most important of all will be the responsibility for initiating projects of acceptable quality and of demonstrable local usefulness."³⁰ Through their intergovernmental partnership, La Guardia and Roosevelt ensured that the WPA would offer jobs to unemployed New Yorkers. Despite leading from two different levels of government, they worked efficiently and established a new criterion for future local and federal governments.³¹ As a previous governor of the state, Roosevelt had a special interest in New York and effectively utilized his relief agency as a solution for recovery.

Some observers noted that New York had become "addicted" to federal funding during La Guardia's terms as mayor.³² Compared to the meager amounts in other major cities, such as \$70,000,000 in Chicago and \$24,000,000 in Boston between 1935 and 1937, the WPA expenditure in New York City was massive.³³ Between August 1, 1935 and August 16, 1937, the WPA spent \$409,195,154 on New York City alone.³⁴ Furthermore, the WPA's budget, along with the Public Works Administration, made up of about 2.3 percent of the nation's annual GDP.³⁵ This extremely high percentage with respect to the budget of the entire country demonstrated the importance that Roosevelt placed on work relief. La Guardia continued to solicit the federal government for funds and Roosevelt responded by funneling additional funds into the WPA in New York. In a book championing the accomplishments of the WPA, La Guardia wrote that "the aid of the Federal Government was solicited and, very frankly, I do not know what we should have done without it."³⁶ La Guardia's gratitude towards the federal government proved that he utilized his amicable relationship with the President to his political advantage. Through this valuable partnership, the WPA in New York made "permanent improvements" in education, transportation, health, and safety.

The cooperation between La Guardia and Roosevelt demonstrated the importance of intergovernmental collaboration. La Guardia even shared that "so long as there is a work relief program supported by the Federal Government that program should be wide enough to give employment to all needy

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employables, leaving to the local Government the care of those who are unable to work.”³⁷ The mayor’s belief in the partnership between the two levels of government contributed significantly to the success he brought to New York. La Guardia believed that as long as the federal government was on their side, New York could accomplish anything. He believed that both the federal and local governments played a distinct role in serving the American people.³⁸ The lucrative collaboration between the local government of New York City and the national government made way for a new and hopeful era of politics in the midst of the Depression-stricken nation.

However, Roosevelt did not offer this financial assistance blindly. He expected La Guardia to openly cross party lines to support the New Deal and the mayor did not hesitate to promote its principles. Roosevelt needed the WPA to flourish in New York City not only for his own reputation, but for the New Deal’s reputation as well. A *New York Times* article noted that “New York City was doing its part in the partnership of which Roosevelt spoke.”³⁹ An advocate against corruption and an enemy of the political machine of Tammany Hall, La Guardia was a fervent believer in the government’s duty to support and provide for its citizens. With Roosevelt’s help, La Guardia proved that the government could provide jobs and inspire hope. Mason Williams, a historian of Democratic politics, wrote that La Guardia set a “new standard of municipal government” and transformed the public’s belief in its expectations for the government.⁴⁰

In the middle of the Great Depression, Roosevelt and La Guardia worked together to make New York a shining example for the rest of the nation. In one of the President’s letters to La Guardia, he shared his hope that other states “would follow New York’s example.”⁴¹ By showcasing the success in New York to the rest of the nation and Congress, he gained credibility for his New Deal. Roosevelt exalted the modern advancements of New York and placed it on a pedestal for the American people to revere. By displaying New York’s developments to the American public, Roosevelt hoped to inspire his people to follow their example. He also wished to put pressure on Congress to appropriate more funds towards New Deal initiatives in light of the great advancements being made in its name. More specifically, Roosevelt greatly invested in work relief through the WPA. By working strategically with La Guardia in New York City, an urban city that consisted of millions of unemployed Americans, Roosevelt maximized the number of Americans, and votes, he could win over and worked diligently to solve the unemployment problem. Consequently, the advancements made through the WPA in New York gave Roosevelt the momentum he needed for his New Deal agenda and put him in place to win the vote in the 1936 presidential election.

La Guardia’s work on the WPA not only gave him a respectable relationship with Roosevelt, but also with top officials who worked for the agency. As a result, the WPA made significant strides in New York modern life, most notably through the La Guardia Airport. This airport connected New York to other states and the rest of the world. La Guardia even boasted in a letter to Roosevelt that “it is the greatest, the best, the most up to date, and the most perfect airport in the United States [...] It is ‘the’ airport of the New World.”⁴² In an address by WPA Commissioner Colonel Francis C. Harrington in 1939, he praised the mayor for the way that he dealt with the unemployment problem in New York City through the construction of the La Guardia Airport.

The problem in New York City was one of particular difficulty because of the concentration of population and resulting high land values. That it has been satisfactorily solved, as it is by this airport, was due largely to the foresight and energy of Mayor La Guardia [...] the enterprise could hardly be carried to completion at this time had it not been that the WPA was able to join with the City in constructing the airport.⁴³

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La Guardia's achievements in utilizing the WPA resulted in his national acclaim as a progressive and bipartisan leader. While top officials gave La Guardia immense praise for his work on the WPA and went out of their way to recognize the New York mayor, O'Connor was not even able to obtain a written response from anyone other than lower ranking officials at the WPA. This disparity demonstrated the significant role that ideology played in the policymaking decisions of those involved with the WPA. While La Guardia publicly supported Roosevelt and the WPA, O'Connor was largely excluded from the inner circle of the administration for being an enemy of work relief.

In contrast to La Guardia and Roosevelt's respectful partnership, Roosevelt and O'Connor, a conservative Democrat from New York, had a hostile relationship that epitomized the divisiveness and discord of 1930's politics. Making matters worse, they were two of the most influential players within the federal government – actively partaking in back-and-forth altercations, with the New Deal often serving as their primary source of disagreement. While Roosevelt held immense power as the head of the executive branch, O'Connor was also influential as the chairman of the powerful House Rules Committee. O'Connor's conservatism was detrimental for Roosevelt because of his continual obstruction of New Deal legislation. The *New Kensington Daily Dispatch* accurately illustrated O'Connor's negative impact on President Roosevelt by characterizing him as a "thorn to FDR."⁴⁴ Roosevelt was aware that O'Connor's chairmanship was vital in determining which New Deal programs could withstand the unpredictability of partisan politics.

Prior to O'Connor's election to Congress in 1923, he was a trial lawyer in New York for 20 years and was a member of numerous influential Bar Associations in the state. He attended public school and was an alumnus of both Brown University and Harvard University School of Law. In 1915, O'Connor was the Secretary and delegate in the New York Constitutional Convention. He was also a member of the New York State Assembly from 1920 to 1923.⁴⁵ Throughout his political career in New York, O'Connor was closely associated with Tammany Hall, serving on their legal team and winning significant cases on their behalf.⁴⁶ His impressive educational background and wide range of political experience made him extremely qualified to enact changes for the benefit of the American people. He was skilled in the practice of law, knowledgeable about the Constitution of New York, and well-connected with the major players in the New York Democratic circle.

O'Connor and Roosevelt's relationship dated long before their careers as a Congressman and President. It is interesting to note that O'Connor came from a prominent and politically active family. O'Connor and his brothers were well-known in the scope of Democratic politics. Initially, O'Connor and his family were fairly supportive of the Roosevelt administration. In 1933, his brother James O'Connor even led the campaign for Roosevelt's nomination in his home state of Maine. *The Bangor Daily Commercial* dubbed James O'Connor as the original "Roosevelt man" for his work on the presidential campaign. These positions of power gave Congressman O'Connor and his family a significant amount of political clout in the 1920's and 1930's. They were not only closely associated with the President, but were part of his close circle of advisors and trusted allies. A few years into O'Connor's political career, when he gained more power and influence in Congress, he shifted his stance and turned against the President.

Furthermore, O'Connor's older brother, Basil O'Connor, was Roosevelt's law partner and also a member of his "Brain Trust," a group of intellectuals who advised the President on the 1932 presidential election and the passage of major legislation.⁴⁷ Basil also worked closely with the President on establishing a polio vaccine. However, when Basil grew cognizant of the political feud between his brother and his longtime colleague and friend, he defended his brother's reputation and hard work. In a letter to

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President Roosevelt, he wrote, "John has spent 25 years in attaining the position that he now holds in public life. [...] I cannot and I do not believe that you are against him."⁴⁸ This passionate letter conveyed Basil's astonishment and disbelief at the rivalry between the two Democratic politicians. It demonstrated how even time and personal connections could not establish an effective *détente* between O'Connor and Roosevelt. In an effort to ease the tension in their relationship, Basil was forced to intervene amid the New Deal hysteria.

Prior to Roosevelt's time in the White House, the nation endured a decade of three "hands-off" Republican Presidents, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover. These Presidents would not have believed it was the duty of the federal government to provide for the populace during the Depression. In particular, Hoover believed that the Depression was a temporary setback that would be solved on its own, through the natural actions of ordinary citizens and businesses. As a conservative Democrat in Congress, O'Connor did not hide his affinity for these laissez-faire Republican Presidents. He exemplified his favorable perspective of President Coolidge while debating House Resolution 372 on the floor, a bill that dealt with the Independent Offices Appropriation Act of 1935. When Congressman Woodrum urged action on this bill, O'Connor responded, "I agree with the gentlemen we have a lot of things to do. Let me repeat what a great President, one of the greatest Presidents representing another party, the late President Coolidge, once said: 'if you sit tight on them long enough they will always back down.'"⁴⁹ O'Connor was certainly referring here to the New Dealers in Congress. As a conservative Democrat, his principles were not in agreement with his progressive colleagues. He utilized this moment to verbalize not only his support for previous Republican Presidents over his support for Roosevelt, but also his intention to stand by his principles in hopes of diminishing the New Dealers' momentum.

After Coolidge decided not to run for a second term, Hoover won in the presidential election of 1928 against Democratic New York Governor Al Smith.⁵⁰ Hoover's appeal came from his endorsement of the philosophy of "rugged individualism," in which he stressed the tenacity of the American people and the importance of exercising self-reliance in such economic downfalls.⁵¹ In a national press release from October of 1931, President Hoover promoted his theory of rugged individualism when he patriotically declared that "no governmental action, no economic doctrine, no economic plan or project can replace that God-imposed responsibility of the individual man and woman to their neighbors."⁵² His statements coincided with O'Connor's conservative mindset that the government should not aggressively intervene in the daily lives of the American people. Similar to O'Connor's endorsement of the ability of private industry to help the people out of the Depression, Hoover also believed in a non-interventionist approach in dealing with the economic and social disaster in the nation.

O'Connor's support of Hoover's approach for a limited government impacted his defense of the President when Hoover was verbally attacked by a Republican Representative. When impeachment talks were rampant in the House after Representative McFadden of Pennsylvania charged Hoover with arranging a war debt moratorium in 1931, O'Connor defended the Republican President. He stressed that "it's my President as well as yours he's talking about, and if none of you are going to defend him I'm going to."⁵³ In defending Hoover, O'Connor publicized his support for the Republican President and demonstrated his willingness to cross party lines to defend his principles. Amid the attacks on Hoover, O'Connor's defense of the President resulted in much embarrassment from the Republican Party. Republicans were humiliated that a Tammany Democrat was supporting their President against one of their own. The *New York Times* even wrote that "New Yorkers are justly proud of Representative O'Connor, who forgot that he was a Democrat in defending the President against a virulent Republican."⁵⁴ This incident portrayed O'Connor's highly outspoken character and his ability to defend

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his beliefs despite their unpopularity. In his interactions with Roosevelt, O'Connor maintained this same mindset and acted on his ideological preferences rather than in alignment with his own party.

Furthermore, O'Connor's affiliation with Tammany Hall played a significant role in his political opposition to Roosevelt. Prior to the creation of the New Deal, Roosevelt encountered much conflict with the political machine in New York. As the Governor of New York, Roosevelt had worked to oust New York City's Mayor Jimmy Walker from his position due to a personal scandal and charges of corruption. Despite Roosevelt's hesitance to compel Walker to testify in the investigation, he decided to do so in an effort to portray himself as an aggressive leader against corruption in light of the 1932 presidential election.⁵⁵ However, his opposition to the Tammany-backed Walker came with a political cost and resulted in a loss of support from the machine. In 1933, Roosevelt opposed Tammany's choice for Mayor and instead endorsed Fiorello La Guardia and "wanted to be damn sure La Guardia would win."⁵⁶ Roosevelt's opposition to Tammany and his support of anti-Tammany politicians not only deprived the political machine of patronage, but also stripped them of their control over City Hall and the City Council. Tammany's inability to provide jobs to its supporters undermined the machine's strength and influence in New York City.

O'Connor's close ties with Tammany and Roosevelt's actions against the machine contributed to his hostility towards Roosevelt. From the beginning of O'Connor's political career, Tammany Hall was an essential component in his political journey from Albany to Washington. Because of Tammany's assistance, O'Connor was loyal to their cause and truly indebted to their support. The head of the political machine, Charles Murphy, was fond of O'Connor and even described him as "a useful, energetic, dependable and sagacious member of the organization."⁵⁷ The Hall was unquestionably impressed with O'Connor and contributed to his success throughout his public service, from the New York State Assembly and all the way to his terms in Congress. O'Connor's connection to Tammany inevitably became a crucial element of his character and persona. When O'Connor attended a meeting with wealthy Republicans in 1938, one observer remarked "doesn't he look *just* like a Tammany politician – you certainly could never miss him."⁵⁸ O'Connor's loyalty to Tammany thus outweighed his loyalty to his own party. Before he was a Democrat, he was a Tammany politician.

Up until the end of O'Connor's political career, the machine sided with their golden boy. Despite their diminishing influence in New York City, the political machine supported O'Connor through Roosevelt's purge and defended him against the actions of the President. The *Chicago Tribune* reported that "Tammany leaders agreed to support Congressman John J. O'Connor, fiery red-headed chairman of the powerful House Rules Committee, who led the fight against the reorganization bill, clothing the executive branch of the government with dictatorial powers."⁵⁹ Tammany fought for O'Connor against what they believed were the "dictatorial" actions of the executive branch. Because of O'Connor's opposition to the President and leadership in the fight against Roosevelt's reorganization bill, Tammany still supported the Congressman through political and financial means. O'Connor's loyal and strong relationship with Tammany thus highlighted his adherence to their ideological principles rather than his allegiance to the Democratic Party.

Prior to the implementation of the WPA in New York City, Roosevelt and O'Connor had already clashed on work relief. When Roosevelt was governor and O'Connor was in Congress, Roosevelt implemented his own local unemployment relief program in New York. However, Tammany took advantage of this relief program due to their loss of patronage. The machine deliberately acquired the allotted unemployment tickets and distributed them through local clubhouses to ensure that votes would go

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their way. Harry Hopkins noted that “politicians won’t stop at anything to get [the] vote lined up and have no regard for WPA or anything except winning elections.”⁶⁰ Tammany politicized work relief even before the New Deal in an effort to strengthen their machine. O’Connor defended their actions in his desperation to earn back patronage privileges. In 1937, he shared how “in recent years the chief bane of my existence – due to the depression and the schism between New York and Washington – has been the job of getting jobs.”⁶¹ Despite O’Connor’s strong ideological beliefs, he was still constrained by political pressures. He was aware that patronage was essential for the political machine as “no machine could long survive without jobs to reward the faithful.”⁶²

Furthermore, when Roosevelt served as the Governor of New York from 1929 to 1932, he only collaborated with O’Connor on a limited number of insignificant projects that lacked any real substance. This included making the Saratoga Battlefield a National Monument and the federal government takeover of the New York State Barge Canal.⁶³ However, Roosevelt still made an effort to maintain an open dialogue with O’Connor and establish a personal relationship with him. In a letter to O’Connor in 1930, Roosevelt thanked him for his work on the Saratoga Battlefield and purposely crossed out the form letter’s address of “Congressman” and wrote in “John” instead.⁶⁴ By using his first name, Roosevelt certainly hoped to regard O’Connor as more of a friend than a colleague. It is uncertain, however, whether O’Connor viewed the governor in the same respect.

Another instance of Roosevelt trying to establish political relations with O’Connor was by inviting him to the State Capitol for a meeting. Referring to an address he gave at a Democratic luncheon in Chicago, Roosevelt wrote to O’Connor that “it has occurred to me that some parts of this speech might be of interest to you and if you have time I will be glad to hear from you as to whether or not you agree with my viewpoint.”⁶⁵ As governor, and before O’Connor’s opposition to the New Deal, Roosevelt sought to hear his perspective on the nation’s current state and wanted to open a productive dialogue between the two public officials. Roosevelt’s relationship with O’Connor, however, was nowhere near the extent of his personal and political connection with La Guardia.

When O’Connor was elected to Congress in 1923, his immediate membership in the Rules Committee was unprecedented. In a statement endorsing O’Connor as the Majority Leader of the House, a colleague described the significance and scope of the Congressman’s influence. He described O’Connor as “a new man never having been made a member of that Committee. He has been on that most important of all committees ever since. Because of his position on that Committee, and his general activities in Congress, he has probably been the most active man on the floor from the North.”⁶⁶ Then, O’Connor’s promotion to chairman in 1935 demonstrated the massive amount of power New York received at the beginning of the Depression. A *Washington Herald* article even reported that “New York Gets Most Chairmanships of Democrats.”⁶⁷ From the beginning of his Congressional career, O’Connor was already setting new precedents that established the extent of a single Member’s power. This foreshadowed the impact he would later have when promoted to the chairmanship of the Rules Committee. Because of his outspoken personality on the floor, he was an active Member in the House compared to his colleagues. Rather than adopting a passive and mellow approach in the legislative process, O’Connor was a man with a fighting nature, always ready to defend the principles he believed in and for the people he represented.

O’Connor’s ambitious character was further demonstrated in his decision to run as a candidate for the Majority Leader of the House in 1931.⁶⁸ He expressed his belief that “the leadership should go to a Northerner” and that the Democrats should have control over the nation and the House.⁶⁹ Despite the widespread support he received from Tammany Hall, members of the Democratic Party, many other

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major political players in the New York delegation, and even Southern Representatives, O'Connor decided to withdraw his candidacy for the Majority Leader. While alternative political motives were not clearly outlined in his announcement of withdrawal, he emphasized his desire to achieve harmony within the Democratic Party before the 1932 presidential election. He instead chose to refocus his efforts on what would benefit the Democratic Party and explained his goal "at which every true Democrat aims – the election of a Democratic President in 1932. To accomplish that result, a united and Harmonious Democracy is indispensable."⁷⁰ This remark depicted O'Connor's early ambition to achieve a unified Democratic Party. He expressed his desire to work alongside his Democratic colleagues, elect a Democratic President, and attain an undivided party to make positive changes for the country. Unbeknownst to him, however, he would become the primary player in leading the emergence of the conservative faction within the Democratic Party. Despite his early support of President Roosevelt, he would eventually oppose the New Deal and actively obstruct its success.

As a Congressman, O'Connor was extremely outspoken and shared his opinion on a wide range of issues that Congress faced, from agriculture to banking and all the way to the New Deal. While O'Connor did identify with the Democratic Party, he pushed for more conservative agendas that were in line with his ideological compass. Much like the formation of the conservative faction within the modern Republican Party, the Democratic Party of the 1930's also faced the conundrum of political coalitions. O'Connor differed from his colleagues because he held a considerable amount of power not only in the House of Representatives, but also within the Congressional leadership. As chairman of the House Rules Committee, he had the authority to grant bills the "rules" that it needed in order to move along the legislative process. With this advantage, he had significant influence in Congress to allow bills to eventually be signed into law by President Roosevelt. O'Connor also served as the Speaker pro tempore for the last 14 days of the 74th Congress.⁷¹ With this short but nevertheless powerful post, O'Connor was theoretically the third in line to become the President of the United States. His power in Congress depicted the political clout he had as a Representative and his ability to be a threatening force within the leadership of the federal government.

O'Connor's perspective of the New Deal was explicitly outlined in the report of "The Accomplishments of the First Session of the 74th Congress in Carrying Out the Pledges of the New Deal" in the Congressional Record. He shared how "the huge task was not yet completed" and how "several millions of our citizens able and willing to work could not find employment in private industry."⁷² He outlined his viewpoints on the work that still needed to be done – citing initiatives such as improving working conditions, agriculture, and housing. Unlike the previous decade of Republican Presidents, O'Connor understood that the nation was faced with a drastic economic crisis. To combat its effects, he advocated the potential that private industry had to provide jobs for the unemployed. In his report, he did not mention work relief and instead, encouraged his colleagues and the American public to lessen the impacts of the Depression by embarking upon different avenues.

In O'Connor's early years in Congress, he was substantially supportive of the interests and rights of laborers. O'Connor and La Guardia were even featured together on *The Federal Employee's* article in 1932 entitled, "Members Who Have Been Outstanding in Upholding Cause of Workers."⁷³ Featured alongside other Members of Congress, O'Connor and La Guardia were praised by the magazine for working hard for the advantage of laborers across the country. This showed that before the creation and implementation of the WPA, O'Connor was not entirely unsympathetic towards the plight of workers. He fervently believed in fighting for their rights and securing benefits for them in Congress. However, he disagreed with the formation of the WPA and the concept of work relief because of his engrained

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ideology that it was not the right solution for the nation. He did not believe it went far enough to help jobless New Yorkers. He opposed the WPA and advocated private business and industry in hopes of truly helping ordinary American workers.

O'Connor's goals in Congress aligned with his desire to help laborers in the nation. When asked about his New Year's resolution in 1937, O'Connor shared that he was "going to help business along this next session of Congress so people could get jobs."⁷⁴ While he did express his desire to solve the unemployment problem, his deliberate decision to help business rather than work relief was contradictory to the mission of the WPA. O'Connor believed that the WPA was blindly giving away jobs at a high expense to the federal government and was not cultivating skillful and motivated workers. Consequently, he decided to support and grow the business sector in hopes of having the American people become reliant on themselves rather than the government. O'Connor believed that business jobs were more effective in developing skilled and independent workers. He was more convinced by the capabilities of private industry to help curb the effects of the Depression and followed the route that conformed most to his beliefs, even if it meant going against the President's popular program.

A political feud did not exist merely between Roosevelt and O'Connor, but also between La Guardia and O'Connor. Their political feud was born long before their disagreements over the New Deal. The two public officials were both in Congress from 1923 to 1933 and passionately worked against each other on various pieces of legislation throughout the decade. For example, in a House debate in 1932, O'Connor and La Guardia had an altercation regarding the delays that occurred within the legislative process in Congress. An enraged O'Connor yelled, "it's ridiculous to spend two days on the proposition as to when we should meet and when we should adjourn. We are here now. Let's stop this monkey business. The country won't stand for this sort of thing."⁷⁵ His anger over the delays in the House highlighted not only the polarized nature of the political parties in Congress, but also their inability to work cooperatively to agree on a simple task, such as the beginning and ending times of a debate.

La Guardia, who was described as the leader of the "allied Progressives" in the House, fought back and challenged O'Connor's authority. At this time, the Democratic Party was not the only party to undergo a political transformation. The New Deal also produced a more diverse Republican Party by dividing them into progressive, moderate, and conservative coalitions.⁷⁶ As a progressive Republican, La Guardia confronted O'Connor to "use his influence as a powerful member of the Rules Committee to bring out some of the important legislation to which he referred."⁷⁷ He threatened O'Connor's leadership within the most powerful committee in the House. Their constant disagreements on the floor illustrated the hostile nature of their political relationship. Their personal and emotional interactions with one another influenced their functions in public service. However, their political discord did not merely begin during the passage of the New Deal, or more specifically, the WPA. Instead, the dynamics of their relationship were constructed a decade before the popular program. It dealt with engrained principles and disrespectful behaviors towards each other – factors that would eventually play important roles in their work on the WPA.

A few years later, when O'Connor was still in Congress and La Guardia served as the Mayor of New York, the two officials also clashed at a luncheon in New York City in 1937. O'Connor and La Guardia exhibited their political and personal hatred for one another over a fight about the keys to City Hall. La Guardia bitterly explained, "formerly it was the custom in this city to give the keys of the city to distinguished guests. But John O'Connor's friends were at City Hall so long they didn't even leave the keys."⁷⁸ In La Guardia's statement, he alluded to O'Connor's affiliation with Tammany Hall. The New York mayor evidently criticized O'Connor's longtime connection with the political boss and the corruption and

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power they held in the city. O'Connor responded by introducing La Guardia as "Mr. Ex-Mayor-shortly-to-be" and declared that "the Mayor made a nice political speech. But he's always making them."⁷⁹ O'Connor reacted by taunting the Mayor's political ambitions and exposing his pretentious behavior. This bitter episode displayed their inability to cooperate in political affairs. Rather than treating one another with respect, the two public officials decided to partake in an ill-mannered public altercation.

At the luncheon, O'Connor also shared stories of his time in Congress with the mayor. He explained that he "sat in Congress with Fiorello for ten years. Every time he took a whack at Tammany I remembered an oath I took at my confirmation. That oath was to stand up and defend. And I stood up and defended."⁸⁰ This portrayed O'Connor's strident stance against La Guardia's attacks. He would not succumb to political attacks and defended his principles. His "fighter" personality made their political feud more complex and incendiary, especially in the case of the New Deal. This altercation highlighted the deep animosity between the two public officials. They clearly had no respect or regard for each other's work and did not hesitate to display their hatred to the public. Rather than cooperating to make greater advancements in the lives of New Yorkers, they decided to engage in an inflammatory interaction to publicize their bitter attitudes towards each other.

O'Connor's outspoken and fierce character was not only outlined in his relationship with La Guardia, but also with other Representatives in Congress. His personality made him extremely menacing to many of his colleagues. When debating an appropriation bill for the WPA on the House floor, O'Connor accused other Members of Congress of being "only interested in jobs, only interested in the allocation of W.P.A. funds which mean jobs."⁸¹ His passionate remarks on the floor emphasized his willingness to fight for the principles he believed in. In an effort to defend his unpopular beliefs, he once quoted Marcus Aurelius, "Flinch not, neither give up nor despair, if the achieving of every act in accordance with right principles is not always successful."⁸² This depicted his perseverance in continuing to push for programs that he genuinely believed would help combat the effects of the Great Depression. He was forceful in his attempts to push for the initiatives he felt were truly beneficial to the American people. But what some saw as forceful, others perceived as autocratic and even dictatorial.

As chairman of the Rules Committee, O'Connor utilized his influential position to obstruct New Deal initiatives. James Patterson, an American historian, showed how the press and his colleagues viewed O'Connor as "one of the most unpopular members of a supposedly popular House" because of his views and personality.⁸³ Patterson noted how O'Connor's obstructionist tactics gave the Rules Committee a reputation as the "villain in an otherwise pro-New Deal drama."⁸⁴ Despite his lack of popularity with the President and the majority of Congress, O'Connor was unmoved and continued to forcefully use his committee to the disadvantage of the New Deal. When debating House Resolution 174, an appropriations bill for the WPA, O'Connor issued a special rule to prolong its passage within Congress.⁸⁵ On the floor, he criticized the President and Democratic Congressmen, impudently declaring that "this [bill] has no privileged status in the House [...] I, for one, do not intend to match demagoguery against demagoguery."⁸⁶

O'Connor's adherence to his principles was made evident in his support of a rule for House Resolution 174, an appropriation bill for work relief in 1935. In his passionate statements, he patriotically explained:

Mr. Speaker, this great House of Representatives can legislate expeditiously and more without the fear of any one man [...] We legislate in this House by a majority, and that majority can always express the will of this House. [...] we, as a parliamentary body, are

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compelled to face that situation, and keep our feet on the floor and not be swept off our foundation by any one man or by any minority. [...] Mr. Speaker, this rule is a test of not yielding to another body, of not yielding to one man or to a small group of men in another body. This rule is a test of maintaining our own dignity.⁸⁷

Rather than being influenced by the remarks of his colleagues regarding the detrimental effects of this rule, O'Connor remained loyal to his principles. Most of the Representatives viewed his actions as an obstruction in his hopes to delay the passage of this bill. He refused to yield to his colleagues and utilized the short amount of time allotted to him to discuss his unpopular viewpoints.⁸⁸ O'Connor's remarks demonstrated how he utilized obstructionist tactics to fight for his ideologies. Skillfully concealing his true intentions in his statements, O'Connor debated by appealing to the moral sense of his colleagues. He assured them that this rule was essential in maintaining the "orderly, respectable, and dignified manner" of the House Rules Committee.⁸⁹

Congressman John O'Connor's obstructionist strategies against the New Deal were most apparent in his passionate opposition to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) in 1937, also known as the Wages and Hours Bill. This piece of legislation was significant because it highlighted the beginning of O'Connor's transformation to a position against the interests of laborers. As the Chairman of the Rules Committee, O'Connor refused to grant the bill the special rule that was required to be considered by Congress. He also constantly refused to directly answer simple questions from his colleagues, such as who was against the bill on the committee and why he was acting in an inconsistent manner. On the House floor, he repeatedly tried stalling the bill and consequently endured hateful political backlash. In a debate regarding the bill, his colleagues vehemently attacked the Chairman, stating he was "just as inconsistent as the North Pole is from the South Pole" and questioning his belief of whether or not the Rules Committee truly was a "servant of the House."⁹⁰ These biting phrases conveyed the disdain and resentment his colleagues' had towards him and his beliefs. In addition to the treatment he received from those in Congress, O'Connor also faced massive criticism from the press. The *New York Herald Tribune* reported, "House Rules Group Holds Pay Bill Back" and even described O'Connor's stalling efforts as a "Committee Blockade."⁹¹

O'Connor, however, was strong-willed and passionate in his response to the opposition from Congress. On the floor, a weary O'Connor fought back against the criticism and declared that "there should be no politics, there should be no geographical lines, there should be no lines drawn anywhere in reference to this bill."⁹² Despite his attempts to obstruct the labor bill, he faced massive political pressure not only in the House, but also from the American public and press. Eventually, the political repercussions began to take their toll and O'Connor decided to speed up the passage of the Wages and Hours Bill. The *New York Journal* dubbed him the "Man of the Hour" once he changed courses.⁹³ O'Connor committed the infamous political flip-flop. As a result of widespread criticism and the newfound damaged reputation of his committee, he decided to appease the pressures building on all sides. This event demonstrated not only the complicated political climate during the Great Depression, but also how the needs of the public began to change in accordance with the low socio-economic condition of the decade.

Despite the flexibility he exhibited with the FLSA, O'Connor would not be as compromising with the WPA. As the chairman of the House Rules Committee, O'Connor moderated numerous debates regarding the WPA, particularly to determine the amount of appropriations that the agency would receive from Congress. With O'Connor as the chairman, WPA legislation often resulted in unresolved outcomes. One particular debate took place in May of 1937 when the House Rules Committee debated appropriations for the WPA. Throughout the debate, Chairman O'Connor seemed subdued and uninterested in the passionate points being made by his colleagues. After accepting seven major

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amendments to the resolution, all of which increased the WPA's appropriation, O'Connor sought to reduce the amount of time that the Congressmen could debate their positions. When Congressman Burdick of North Dakota gave a telling narrative of the dire condition of his constituents and his inability to garner support for his amendments, O'Connor bluntly replied that "the Chair might state that there are at least seven amendments pending, and they will not at all be reached within the time allotted unless there is some suggestion that debate be reduced to about 2 minutes."⁹⁴ Rather than listening to Burdick's concerns and offering a solution to his problems, O'Connor ridiculed his efforts to increase the WPA appropriation. The Congressional Record concluded that the "Committee, having had under consideration the joint resolution (H.J. Res. 361) making appropriations for relief purposes, had come to no resolution thereon."⁹⁵

Congressman O'Connor not only spoke against the implementation of the WPA, but also acted on his disapproval of the New Deal agency. He obstructed the passage of various WPA bills and projects and also actively worked with opponents of Roosevelt's New Deal. Some of his efforts include attempting to earmark \$150,000,000 of relief for highway construction and even seeking to reduce WPA Administrator Harry Hopkins' salary.⁹⁶ These actions emphasized O'Connor's lack of respect for the mission and purpose of the WPA. His hopes to earmark a WPA project showed his desire to increase government accountability for relief projects and make it more difficult for Congress to appropriate funds for the WPA. O'Connor abhorred the idea of appropriating such a significant amount of funds for work relief. Furthermore, his attempt to decrease Hopkins' salary emphasized the scope of his opposition to the WPA. He would stop at nothing to exemplify his disapproval of the agency, even if it meant interfering with the creator's salary.

O'Connor's opposition to the implementation of the WPA placed him under much political pressure. He was obliterated not only by members of the Republican Party, but especially by those of his own party. When debating a WPA bill on the floor, a Congressman by the name of Mr. Stack exposed the dilemma O'Connor faced:

The Honorable John O'Connor is against this bill. Surely to God he can have no hidden motive for his vote and his action, because the prudent political thing for him to do would be to keep his 100 percent support of President Roosevelt intact. His motive for being against this bill, as he has stated here in the House, is not because he is anti-Roosevelt but because he does not think the bill should be considered and passed, at least just now.⁹⁷

Mr. Stack's admittance that it would be "prudent" for O'Connor to support this bill depicted the tense position O'Connor was trapped in. As a member of Roosevelt's popular party, he was expected to loyally and wholeheartedly follow their Democratic leader. Instead, the nation saw progressive Republicans like La Guardia going against the norm of politics to side with Roosevelt and support the WPA and conservative Democrats like O'Connor disagreeing with the WPA. Unfortunately, O'Connor's ideological principles were not attuned to the politics of the time. He was passionate in his belief of what he thought to be right for the country and abided by his ideologies rather than politics. In the case of the WPA, O'Connor made the deliberate decision to separate himself from the popular programs of the admired President Roosevelt.

Despite his devotion to his principles, Congressman O'Connor still encountered political pressure from his constituents in New York's 16th District. He received a large number of constituent mailings regarding the WPA in his district. His constituents ranged from ordinary citizens to union workers to private businesses. Each side articulated its interest to their representative, urging him to vote for or

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against particular bills regarding work relief. The constituent mailings came in various forms, including handwritten letters, formal business letters, and even postcards. Mostly, the mailings asked the Congressman to support pieces of legislation that ensured the continuation of the WPA. While these mailings may have softened O'Connor's perspective on the WPA, he remained dedicated to his principles without publicly opposing the federal agency. Although he faced political pressure from his own constituents, O'Connor continued to obstruct New Deal legislation because he believed that federal work relief was not an effective solution to the Great Depression.

A major form postcard that O'Connor received in his office occurred at the height of the WPA in 1937. Sent by numerous constituents, this postcard urged O'Connor to help increase the WPA expenditure for the next year. The postcard read:

Hundreds of thousands of persons are still dependent on Home Relief in New York City.
Millions are still unemployed throughout the country.
WPA expenditures in 1936 were \$165,000,000 monthly.
If you vote less than \$825,000,000 for the five month period ending June 30th, you are voting to dismiss WPA workers, to curtail useful projects, to force America back to the "pauperism of the dole."
If you vote more than \$825,000,000, you are voting to transfer families from the Home Relief dole to useful WPA employment.
We expect and trust that you will defend the economic security of millions of WPA workers with as much energy as though your own economic security was at stake.⁹⁸

This postcard ended with the constituents' name, signature, and address to prove that they were voters in his district. By referring to the consequences of his vote, these postcards aimed to appeal to the Congressman's morality. The postcard highlighted the dire effects of voting for a lesser WPA expenditure and the positive outcomes of voting for a higher expenditure. It concluded with an appeal to O'Connor's humanity, urging him to act as if his own "economic security was at stake."⁹⁹ The sheer number of these postcards proved that his constituents wanted to put immense pressure on him to vote to increase the expenditure on which many of their livelihoods depended. As eligible voters, O'Connor's constituents had the power to keep or remove him from office. O'Connor had a major obligation, if he wanted to be reelected, to act on their behalf and demonstrate that his views were in solidarity with theirs.

However, O'Connor personally did not hold the same views as the majority of voters in his district. Despite the disparity between his own views and those of his district, he was forced politically to publicly display his support for the WPA. Although O'Connor's support was not as enthusiastic as Mayor La Guardia's, he still needed to leave the impression that he was working in Congress for the advancement of the WPA; his career was at stake. But he was still reluctant. He simply replied to the postcards by saying, "I have your letter of January 26th in reference to the appropriation for the Works Progress Administration and shall do all I can."¹⁰⁰ This simple and short message was typical of the Congressman and his office. He did not specify how he would work in favor of increasing WPA appropriations nor address his own viewpoints on the matter. His response lacked any genuine articulation of what role he had in the advancement of the WPA.

Minimal responses on work relief were commonplace for the New York Congressman. When mail regarding the WPA was sent to O'Connor, his office would release a similar response, stating the date of the letter and that he would "do all I can." On occasion, he would respond differently by stating that he

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shared the same viewpoint as his constituent. In a postcard regarding the Wages and Hours Bill, a constituent asked O'Connor to vote for it "without any further amendments to said Bill."¹⁰¹ In response, O'Connor wrote that "I have your post card of May 18th in reference to the Wage and Hour Bill and I am glad to have your views on this measure."¹⁰² However, when a different constituent expressed his opposition to the same bill and advised him to vote against the measure, O'Connor gave the same, impersonal response. The constituent wrote:

As a worker, I am writing to urge that you vote against the proposed Wage and Hour bill, and use your influence to defeat it. I am convinced that it will deal another terrific blow to business which is struggling to get on its feet, and as a result add more millions to the unemployed.¹⁰³

O'Connor's response to this constituent was contradictory to his principles. It was merely "I have your letter of May 19th in reference to the Wage and Hour Bill and I am glad to have your views on this measure."¹⁰⁴ While one post card emphasized support of the Wages and Hours Bill, this letter criticized the same bill. These inconsistent remarks revealed O'Connor's attempt to appease all of the viewpoints of his constituents to buy himself time. It was also significant that these conflicting responses occurred so close to Roosevelt's attempted purge in the 1938 primary elections. It is likely that O'Connor would have responded in this equivocal manner to gain support from his diverse constituency. Rather than forcefully expressing his own perspectives to the citizens in his district at this time, O'Connor thought it was more prudent to mislead his constituents into believing that he was fighting for their cause. His deception and manipulation emphasized his desire to be reelected and maintain his political power.

In addition to clashing with his constituents on work relief, O'Connor had a hostile and unproductive political relationship with WPA Administrator Harry Hopkins. Despite O'Connor's attempts to work with Hopkins, the administrator was not receptive to the requests that O'Connor made for his district. In 1936, O'Connor expressed concern to Hopkins about his plan to lay off 42,000 employees on New York City projects. O'Connor wrote:

They have got to be taken care of in some way and we may be only reverting to the dole. I am one of those who believe that private industry has not sufficiently cooperated and of course until it does the problem remains one for the Government. I do wish you would give this New York situation reconsideration because the problem there is different from any place else in the country.¹⁰⁵

The Congressman reiterated his concern that this action would hurt the white-collar class in his district. He shared that the government needed to step up and help workers when other options were exhausted. He ended the letter by eliciting a sense of urgency that the problem in New York City was more severe than in other states. Despite being a fervent believer in the capabilities of private industry, he admitted that they were not cooperative at the time in diminishing the unemployment problem. This episode was another instance in which O'Connor was conflicted between his political ambitions and ideology. He was forced to support the WPA out of an obligation to his constituents and their welfare. This political pressure compelled him to please his constituents and provide them with immediate relief, despite his opposition to the methods of the WPA.

Hopkins had his Assistant Administrator, Lawrence Westbrook, reply to O'Connor's letter a few days later. Westbrook wrote that "I wish to advise that these reductions are now being made in all States according to the original plan of the Works Program. [...] Throughout this period of severe weather the Works Progress Administration employed many more workers than it had originally contemplated, and for which funds were available."¹⁰⁶ The letter continued to explain that the funds were "being rapidly

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exhausted” and that a Congressional action was needed in order to extend employment under the WPA. This impersonal response revealed that O’Connor lacked any real political clout or personal connection with Hopkins. Instead, Hopkins decided to have his assistant respond to O’Connor and continued to lay off the workers despite O’Connor’s plea in his letter.

After months of trying to reach Hopkins by letter correspondence and only receiving responses from his aides, O’Connor sent an impassioned letter in July of 1936 to the Associate Director, Roscoe Wright, to express his frustration with the department.

I have never been able to get a reply from Mr. Hopkins to any letters which I wrote to him and my situation in New York City, trying to place people to work and on relief, or otherwise, is no different from that of every other Democratic member of the House. I have practically given up all hope of receiving anything but insults from your Works Progress Administration.

In New York City, where the Administration is controlled by Mayor La Guardia and Mr. Moses, no Democrat can see a fourth assistant secretary let alone one of the heads.

Being young, however, and still retaining some patience, I shall just wait.¹⁰⁷

This letter exposed the animosity O’Connor felt towards those who ran the WPA. His disrespectful attitude towards the WPA was a result of the WPA’s treatment of him and his requests. He grew impatient and was offended with how the agency’s personnel regarded him. His experiences with the WPA contributed to his resentment towards its leadership and mission. His disdain, however, did not stop with the administration. He blamed La Guardia for his inability to receive a proper response from the WPA. O’Connor may have believed that he was being treated differently because of his conservatism and wanted to be treated “no different from every other Democratic member.”¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, O’Connor did not have a respectable political relationship with WPA officials or the one official who was in authority in New York City, La Guardia. His bitter interactions with Hopkins and La Guardia prevented him from helping his constituents and making any real progress with the WPA in his district.

Like La Guardia, O’Connor’s stance on the unemployment relief of the WPA was based on his engrained ideological principles. While La Guardia fervently believed in the government’s active role in helping the people of New York City, O’Connor believed the problem of the Great Depression would be solved by private business. He encouraged a solution based on business and skill rather than temporary relief. In a nationwide address with the National Radio Forum, O’Connor urged the federal and local governments to adopt a more permanent solution to the unemployment problem. He discussed how government relief “does not go far enough – that it is only a temporary palliative.”¹⁰⁹ While La Guardia truly believed the future of the nation would be more prosperous only if the government could effectively intervene with unemployment relief, O’Connor believed recovery could best be achieved by encouraging passivity on the part of the federal government.

In the address, O’Connor also criticized the WPA for employing unskilled labor rather than trained mechanics. While private businesses employed skilled workers in different professions, the government was blindly employing unskilled workers merely in an attempt to ease the nation’s anxieties. In reference to WPA projects, O’Connor exposed the selfish behavior of some Members of Congress when they support a “spending program” simply to take credit for the advancements being made in their respective districts. Distinguishing himself from his self-interested colleagues, O’Connor expressed that his concern was “not alone for the little district 2 miles long and ½ mile wide [...] I realize the obligation I owe as a Representative of not only the 12,000,000 people of the great State of New York, but also the 120,000,000 people in our country.”¹¹⁰ These statements exemplified O’Connor’s holistic perspective

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towards the future of the nation. Rather than supporting the WPA for political gains and appraisal, O'Connor recognized his obligation was to the American public and not his constituents alone.

O'Connor's fervent opposition to the WPA stemmed from his commitment to solve the unemployment problem not through relief, but through business. In this radio address, he discussed his solution to recovery and compared the government expenditure of \$1,000,000,000 on public works to private enterprise, claiming that "it is only a drop in the bucket compared with what private capital has available to spend if properly encouraged."¹¹¹ In stark contrast to La Guardia's progressive government ideology, O'Connor believed that the calamity of the Great Depression could only be solved permanently by trusting in the benefits of private business. Rather than adopting La Guardia's aggressive promotion of the WPA, O'Connor genuinely believed that the unemployment problem should be left to the private sector. He ended his address by admitting that "it may work for the moment – but what are we going to do when there are no more rabbits in the hat?"¹¹²

O'Connor's opposition to the New Deal eventually led to the end of his political career. The "purge" of 1938 exposed a President's wrath against his resistance and a Mayor's commitment to the WPA in New York City. The "purge," coined by the press, was Roosevelt's endeavor to cleanse his party of Congressmen who tried to sabotage against him and his New Deal – particularly anti-New Deal, conservative Democrats. However, Roosevelt's antipathy towards conservatism was not a new phenomenon. As the governor of New York, he had denounced the conservative mentality that advocated for a limited government. In a speech delivered at a Democratic event in 1929, Roosevelt criticized conservatives as those "who shut their eyes blindly" and "hold an almost childlike faith" in laissez-faire capitalism.¹¹³

Through the purge, Roosevelt held onto this same mentality. He sought to realign his party to a more liberal platform and diminish the power of the conservative faction that threatened his New Deal. As his influence on conservative Democrats weakened, he found himself unable to exercise authority over members of his own party. Roosevelt was frustrated with the hypocrisy of Democrats and felt a "special animosity" toward those who were willing to run alongside him and then vote against the same pledges on which they had been elected.¹¹⁴ The betrayed President thus decided to interfere in Democratic elections to secure enough support to pass his legislation. Describing the 1938 election, Adam Lapin of the *Daily Worker Washington Bureau* was conscious of Roosevelt's strategies and even admitted that "if O'Connor is defeated, the chances of getting progressive legislation passed at the next session will be considerably improved."¹¹⁵ Although Roosevelt did not pay much attention to nor exert much effort on O'Connor's reelection particularly, he was ultimately the sole victim in the purge of 1938.

La Guardia, however, played an essential role in ousting O'Connor during Roosevelt's purge. Not only did he cultivate a ripe environment for the purge in Manhattan, but he also used the city's resources to support the Democratic Party's pro-New Deal candidate, James Fay. When asked by the press if he thought O'Connor would be defeated, La Guardia asserted that "there isn't a question about it."¹¹⁶ He went on to explain how he had worked with O'Connor for a decade in Congress and saw his ineffectual governance firsthand. La Guardia's active role in campaigning against O'Connor revealed his opposition to O'Connor's conservative ideals, his commitment to a broader progressive cause, his desire to weaken the political influence of Tammany Hall, and his allegiance to Roosevelt. For the first time, he illustrated his support for a "Roosevelt electoral cause" by investing his own political resources to campaign against O'Connor.¹¹⁷

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The WPA's opposition to O'Connor was also paramount in guaranteeing his defeat in the primary election. O'Connor confided to the press that many WPA workers feared that they would lose their jobs if he was reelected.¹¹⁸ Although he emphatically denied this, his need to clarify his position emphasized his desperation to obtain the support of WPA workers in his district. But O'Connor failed to appeal to such WPA employees because of his reluctance to fight for their cause during his time as their Congressman. Even before the implementation of the WPA, O'Connor faced massive political pressure from his constituents in New York's 16th District to alter his stance against a job relief program. Different interest groups, including the Social Service Commission, Women's City Club, Social Science Research Council, The Spectator Company, and Catholic Central Verein reached out to O'Connor and asked him to support bills that helped the unemployed. They expressed their concern that "widespread unemployment has caused much suffering and hardship" and urged him to work to bring "conditions back to normal."¹¹⁹ Despite this pressure, O'Connor's anti-relief position seemed inflexible throughout his terms in Congress. He was even dubbed the "Wages-Bill foe" by a labor newspaper.¹²⁰ As the chairman of the House Rules Committee, he repeatedly delayed the Wages and Hours Bill and impeded various WPA bills throughout the legislative process.¹²¹

Because of La Guardia and the WPA's tremendous efforts, O'Connor lost his election. Outraged, he filed an affidavit against the WPA and charged them with coercing workers to vote against him, leading to an investigation by WPA Administrator Aubrey Williams. While O'Connor was certainly seeking revenge, there was some merit to his claims. Methods of coercion did exist in efforts to realign the Democratic Party. In O'Connor's own district in Manhattan, WPA workers were told that "this will be the last check you get if O'Connor is renominated."¹²² Furthermore, WPA workers in New York organized themselves into "shock troops" to campaign from house-to-house against O'Connor.¹²³ The WPA's active role against O'Connor's campaign illustrated the agency's opposition to his terms in office.¹²⁴ WPA officials were willing to expend an overwhelming amount of resources to ensure that only New Deal supporters would win the ballot. Their opposition to anti-New Deal politicians demonstrated the value they placed on having federal officials in Congress fighting for their cause. On the local level, the WPA workers knew they had Mayor La Guardia on their side. O'Connor, on the other hand, repeatedly attacked the very foundation the WPA was built on.

Despite Roosevelt's direct intervention in many electoral races on his "hit list," and his mostly passive role in O'Connor's race, only O'Connor was purged at the conclusion of the 1938 elections. In retaliation, O'Connor vehemently declared that the purge was "a violation of the Constitution and grossly un-American."¹²⁵ The feud between these two federal officials revealed the inflammatory nature of their relationship. O'Connor was replaced as chairman of the Rules Committee with a New Deal supporter, Representative Adolph Sabath from Illinois. No longer chaired by an anti-relief politician, the Rules Committee's new chairman pledged to "fight for the principles of the New Deal."¹²⁶ Roosevelt, however, was mistaken in believing that he no longer had to engage in quarrels with the Rules Committee and members of Congress when he had Sabath on his side. He thought he could pass his New Deal legislation more rapidly and smoothly without O'Connor's sabotage. However, even with O'Connor out of the picture, Roosevelt was still unable to pass his valuable legislation for the American people. The new chairman was faced with a conservative majority on the committee of five Republicans and five Southern Democrats.¹²⁷ Little did Roosevelt know that the new composition of this Rules Committee would "make life difficult for Sabath."¹²⁸

A defeated O'Connor scrambled to find another ticket to run on – turning to the Republican Party, the Andrew Jackson Party, and even trying to run as an Independent.¹²⁹ He never regained elected office and retreated to a career in law. However, his purge did not silence him. After being purged from the

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Democratic Party, O'Connor did not cease to demonstrate his hatred towards Roosevelt and the New Deal. Filled with vain and anger, he accused the President of making "deals in emotion" and declared that Roosevelt would not have a fourth term "if the voters realize in time the full extent of the President's vanities and his willingness to deceive."¹³⁰ His purge demonstrated the drastic consequences of opposing a popular President and his equally popular programs. While O'Connor fought fiercely for his beliefs, he was a hindrance to Roosevelt's work relief plans for the nation. O'Connor's deliberate decision to oppose the WPA resulted in his public humiliation and the termination of his political career. In contrast, La Guardia parlayed his bipartisan support of the WPA into a resounding political success. He pushed a progressive agenda in New York City and accepted federal funds wholeheartedly, earning the President's respect and support.

Roosevelt's purge proved to be politically fatal for his presidential career. Although he removed the possibility of obstruction to his New Deal legislation, he immorally intervened in the democratic process during the elections of 1938. Headlines read, "Democracy weakens," "Another Committee Affected," and "Dictatorship Again."¹³¹ His appetite for vengeance did not help him achieve a united Democratic Party. Rather than securing support for his New Deal legislation, Roosevelt only divided his party further. Roosevelt's involvement in the purge made the American people question his growing power in the executive branch and led to criticism from his colleagues in the federal government.¹³² Although O'Connor's purge was made possible by the cooperation between the local government in New York and the national government, it was a major loss for democracy. Its methods of coercion, intimidation, and intervention robbed the citizens of New York of their voice. Roosevelt's purge took this liberty away from the American people and diminished their ability to formulate an opinion for themselves.

The WPA in New York was just one instance of intergovernmental and political party collaboration. The New Deal had vast implications in many different areas of the country. Further research could analyze a different political response, such as one that includes working across state and city politics, rather than through the federal government. By excluding the federal government from the equation, one can fully examine the results that emerged solely from local and state governments. More research could also illustrate an instance in which political relationships failed in implementing different programs of the New Deal. It could investigate how these different political responses contribute to the ongoing discussion of the effect of public officials in helping their respective constituencies. Finally, suggestions for further studies could include analyzing the difference between the WPA's implementation in urban versus rural areas in the United States. This study could have interesting implications regarding the success or failure of its application in different geographical areas. It could also inspire research into the many nuances that come with crafting legislation and bipartisan efforts.

The WPA inaugurated a different era of politics – one that allowed a liberal Democratic President and liberal Republican mayor from different parties and levels of government to enact widespread changes for the American people, while altogether marginalizing a conservative Democratic Congressman. La Guardia and Roosevelt were passionate in their support of the WPA, but O'Connor was also passionate in his opposition. Ideology rather than party played a major role in the political decisions and policymaking of these particular public servants. The argument over work relief in New York City demonstrated the emergence of a Democratic conservative faction and the reality of bipartisan cooperation during the Great Depression. In a telling declaration at a national press conference in 1938, Roosevelt proclaimed that "the good of the country rises above party."¹³³

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⁴⁶ *The John J. O'Connor Collection* as found in the Frank Mt. Pleasant Library of Special Collections and Archives at Chapman University, Scrapbook #2, 124.

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⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ "New York Gets Most Chairmanships of Democrats," *Washington Herald*, December 5, 1931.

⁶⁸ The position of the Majority Leader was noteworthy because it was essentially right below the Speaker in terms of House leadership. The third in House leadership was the Chairman of the House Rules Committee, a promotion O'Connor would eventually earn in 1935.

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⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

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⁸¹ Congressman O'Connor, speaking on the Works Progress Administration. 75th Congress, 3rd session, *Congressional Record* 83 (April 7, 1938). The Law Library of Congress at Washington, DC. 4994.

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⁸⁴ Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, 53.

⁸⁵ A special rule provides the terms and conditions of debate on a measure or matter, consideration of which constitutes the bulk of the work of the Rules Committee. There are four types of rules: Open rules, which permit the offering of any amendment that otherwise complies with House rules, and allows debate under the 5-minute rule. Modified-Open rules, which operate much like an open rule, but have some restriction on the "universe" of amendments, either through a pre-printing requirement or an overall time limit on consideration of amendments. Structured rules, which specify that only certain amendments may be considered and specify the time for debate. And closed rules, which effectively eliminate the opportunity to consider amendments, other than those reported by the committee reporting the bill. "About the Committee on Rules – History and Processes, Special Rule Process" on House of Representatives Committee on Rules website. www.rules.house.gov. Accessed February 20, 2016.

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- ¹²¹ Dunn, *Roosevelt's Purge*, 79.
- ¹²² "La Guardia 'Coercion' Charged by O'Connor," *Reading Eagle*, Oct. 23, 1938, Page 3.

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¹²³ The use of shock troops was a practice in which WPA workers organized themselves into groups to campaign in a house-to-house canvas of relief families, ringing doorbells and making personal visits to the homes, in the hopes of ultimately purging O'Connor as a potential Democratic Representative.

¹²⁴ *The John J. O'Connor Collection*, Scrapbook #3, 60.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 9.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 32.

¹²⁷ Dunn, *Roosevelt's Purge*, 211.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*.

¹²⁹ *The John J. O'Connor Collection*, Scrapbook #3, 32.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, Scrapbook #5, 99.

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