

# F.D.R. Got It. Most Democrats Don't.

By [David Leonhardt](#) Jan. 12, 2020

In January 1937, near the end of Franklin Roosevelt's first term as president, Life magazine [published](#) a map of the United States spread over two full pages. The headline read: "What President Roosevelt Did to the Map of the U.S. in Four Years with \$6,500,000,000."

Scattered around the map were dozens of small drawings, each showing a project funded by Roosevelt's stimulus program. They included the Triborough Bridge, Manhattan's Midtown tunnels, bridges on Cape Cod, schools in South Carolina, dorms at Texas Tech, the Kansas City Civic Auditorium, the Los Angeles Aqueduct and [the Grand Coulee Dam](#). A few of the drawings summarized broader projects, like "2 U.S. aircraft carriers" and "120 U.S. airports."

Since taking office in 1933, Roosevelt hadn't only rescued the country from the Great Depression. He had made sure that the country knew he had rescued it. His projects were big, tangible and unmistakably the work of the federal government. The projects changed how Americans thought about government.

In recent decades, Democrats have too often forgotten this lesson. They have created technocratically elegant policies that quietly improve people's lives, like tax credits or insurance subsidies. The problem with this approach is that it does little to build popular support for government action.

Put it this way: How many projects can you name from Barack Obama's stimulus program? Can you name any project or agency that Bill Clinton created?

Clinton and, [even more so](#), Obama, were successful presidents. Yet their administrations were still hindered by a certain naïveté. Officials sometimes tried to perfect policy design while proudly ignoring political impact, as if the two could be separated in a democracy.

Republicans don't suffer from this naïveté. Again and again, they push policies [meant to affect politics](#), such as campaign-finance deregulation, voting restrictions and labor-union constraints. Republicans understand a concept that political scientists refer to as "policy feedback" — namely, that policy can influence politics in ways that make future policy changes more or less likely.

In the last several years, policy feedback has finally started getting [more attention](#) in progressive circles. And one of the politicians who's most interested in the subject happens to be running for president: Elizabeth Warren.

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While the rest of the Obama administration was pushing a financial-reform bill that was impenetrable to most Americans, Warren insisted on an idea with Rooseveltian simplicity. It [became](#) the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which tries to protect people from being cheated or deceived by banks.

Warren's presidential agenda has several other easily understandable ideas, like a \$200-a-month [increase](#) in Social Security benefits, a [price reduction](#) for insulin and other popular drugs, the [cancellation](#) of up to \$50,000 in student debt and [a wealth tax](#). During a recent interview with her, I mentioned that she seemed to believe that bigger ideas were sometimes easier to accomplish than more modest ones. "I do," she replied. Big ideas can inspire people; tax

credits do not.

I don't agree with all of Warren's ideas (see: [Medicare for All](#)), but I think she is onto something important here. Creating a new era of progressive change — to take on problems like climate change and extreme inequality — depends on persuading more Americans that government is a force for good.

The best way to improve the image of government is not through soaring speeches by politicians. It's through a version of the old journalism cliché: Show, don't tell. "You want people to be able to see the way government is helping them," Jacob Hacker, a Yale political scientist, says, "and have a stake in defending it."

Right now, the government often does the opposite. Many programs are hidden in the tax code, as Suzanne Mettler of Cornell explained in her book ["The Submerged State."](#) Upper-middle-class families receive thousands of dollars from the mortgage-interest deduction without thinking of it as a government benefit. Lower-income families sign up for the earned-income tax credit by visiting a tax-preparation company, which can make the benefit appear to come from H&R Block, rather than Uncle Sam.

The Obama stimulus remains the canonical example. Out of a well-intended desire to get Americans to spend more of their stimulus tax cut, the administration snuck the money into people's paychecks, rather than sending one-time checks (as George W. Bush had done in 2001) that families might have saved.

Economically, [it worked](#). Spending rose, helping to end the financial crisis. Politically, [it was a dud](#). Many Americans gave Obama little credit and voted for Republicans in the 2010 midterms, virtually killing his larger legislative agenda. The stealth tax cut was a smart idea, but it needed to be paired with more salient forms of stimulus, like those projects on the Life Magazine map.

One reason that modern-day Democrats have pursued technocratic policies is the desire to win some Republican votes in Congress. Yet those votes almost never materialize. Today's Republican Party is [too radical](#). Democrats are then left defending complex programs — like Obamacare's private exchanges — rather than simple, popular ones — like an expanded Medicare, open to all who want it.

The next Democratic president, whoever it is, shouldn't repeat this mistake. In climate policy, this would mean putting more emphasis on a green-jobs program than on [a hated carbon tax](#). In education, it could mean creating a "public option" for pre-K. In every area, it also means making sure that government functions well.

Public policy really does have the potential to shape public opinion. Years after Roosevelt created Social Security, one of his advisers suggested to him that funding it with a new tax — the payroll tax — had been a mistake during the Depression. Roosevelt [responded](#) that the tax transformed the politics of Social Security, making it feel like a savings program rather than welfare.

"I guess you're right on the economics," Roosevelt told the adviser. But "those taxes aren't a matter of economics — they're straight politics." As the president explained, "With those taxes in there, no damn politician can ever scrap my Social Security program."

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