



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## CLASSROOM | 4-8 Activities : “The Presidents Speak”

### Consider This ...

In the days before television, President Franklin Roosevelt was an expert at speaking to the American people on the radio. He put complicated problems into simple terms that everyone could understand. He led America during very difficult times: the Great Depression and World War II. Historian David Halberstam wrote this about Roosevelt: “He was the first great American radio voice. For most Americans of this generation, their first memory of politics would be sitting by a radio and hearing that voice, strong, confident, totally at ease. If he was going to speak, the idea of doing something else was unthinkable. If they did not have a radio, they walked . . . to the home of a more fortunate neighbor who did.”

Can you think of a person or event that has drawn you to the radio or television in this way? Did you share this moment with family or friends? How do you find out about news from the White House today?

Ask your grandparents or someone of their age if they remember listening to Roosevelt on the radio. What did President Roosevelt talk about, and where were they when they were listening to the radio? How did they react — and how did their family react — to what he said? Ask your parents about their first memory of seeing or hearing a president speak. When did it happen? Who was the president, and what was he talking about? Why do they remember it so well? Take notes and share your answers with your classmates.



*A man and his son listen to a battery-powered radio, 1940s. National Archives*



## ***What's the Reach?***

As technology has improved, the president should be able to reach more people with his message. In 1790, the population of the United States was about 3,900,000. If we estimate that George Washington spoke to 100,000 citizens on his lengthy tours, what percentage of Americans did he reach? Review what you have read in this lesson and make a list of how many people heard or saw the speeches of Calvin Coolidge, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman. Locate the date on which each one gave his speech and research the population of the United States on or around that date, then calculate the percentage of Americans that heard each of those three speeches. Hint: since 1790, the federal government has counted the population of the United States every 10 years by taking a census. You can find the population at the beginning of each decade by using most almanacs, either published in a book or on the Internet. You can also use the Internet and search the site of the United States Bureau of the Census: [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov).

At this point, you should have compiled the following information for George Washington, Calvin Coolidge, Franklin Roosevelt, and Harry Truman: date of speech, number of citizens who heard the president, population of the United States, and percentage of population that heard the president. Using this information, create a bar graph that would illustrate this information. Consider adding to it as you do more research. When Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous Gettysburg Address, how many people were in the audience? It is estimated that 98% of American households own a television today. When the president gives his state of the union message every January, for example, how many Americans could watch it?



*Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy participate in a televised debate, 1960. Library of Congress*

*Timeline — What's Next?* ... Using the information presented in your reading, do additional research to create a timeline from George Washington's day until the present . . . and beyond. Note the dates, presidents in office, and the inventions or the communication technology available. Remember that new transportation methods help speed communication, too. Be creative. Think about how satellites and the Internet might soon be used to make communicating with the president even easier. If you were to invent a new communication tool for the year 2020, what would it be? Draw it and add it to your timeline.

