

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

April 24th, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about the differences and similarities between the League of Nations and the United Nations. In the interview segment, ER discusses congressional redistricting with Congressman Emanuel Celler.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt, Elliott Roosevelt, Emanuel Celler

[ER:] This is Eleanor Roosevelt speaking. Elliott and I are very happy to be able to bring you this program each day from my living room here in the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York City. I hope you'll find the program we planned for today an interesting one. Elliott, will you tell us about it, please?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, I'd be glad to. He is Emanuel Celler, Democratic congressman from New York. He is going to outline a bill now before Congress recommending important changes in congressional districting throughout the country. Mrs. Roosevelt will introduce Congressman Celler a little later on in the program. First, however, one of our listeners is interested in hearing some of the differences between the League of Nations and the United Nations. We're going to go over some of these differences as soon as we've heard from our sponsors, who make this recorded program possible.

(Break 1:01-1:10)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Today, Mrs. Roosevelt has a letter from a gentleman in California, who signs himself merely Lloyd. The letter poses an interesting question, which is, "Why was the old League of Nations not more inclusive than the present UN? And why does the present UN think itself more advanced than the old League?" And the last question is, "Where are we going?" [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] Well, [ER clears throat] the-the present UN, of course, was--the charter of the present UN was drawn up by people who had watched the League of Nations and attempted to meet some of the difficulties which had brought about the failure of the original League. Now uh, in some of the things that they tried to do it has not been possible um to carry them out as yet. But um I do think that the present United Nations has safeguarded some of the difficulties that arose in the old League, and um the mere fact that there are more people, um more big powers including ourselves in it, and more-more um countries gradually coming in and means, I think, that it will eventually be all-inclusive, and um that would be a very desirable thing from my point of view. Where are we going? Um I should say that that was a question that only the future could answer. But if he wants to know where we ourselves are going, I think at the present time we are bending all our efforts to preventing a third world war. And to do that, we are helping in every way we know how to strengthen the United Nations, feeling that that is our only machinery through which we can work. Now um, the fact that the world is filled with unrest um is not strange. We've might have expected it, I think, after the last war, um and I think we probably will continue to be um in an uncertain world. If we go back in our history, we've lived in uncertainty a good part of our history. It was so in the early in the days. It's been--it was certainly so during the war between the states, and uh it probably will be so for some time. If we are successful and set up and strengthen um machinery, which admittedly will have to be improved as time goes on, um I think we may succeed in an experiment which has been tried before and failed but which someday should succeed.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I'd like to go back, if you don't mind, to your statements with regard to why the UN is more inclusive than the old League of Nations. Um I would gather from what you said and from what I've read in books--

[ER:] I don't remember just how many states were in the old League, but I do remember that we were not in it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, that-that is one of the things that I wanted to bring out. That primarily um most of the nations that belonged to the old League of Nations uh felt that its failure to have teeth and to be able to do anything um was because the United States did not join. And the United States happened to be one of the five great powers in the--at that time when it was formed and one of the victorious nations uh which came out of the First World War. But um I feel also that the old League failed because the old League stopped uh in any effort to control aggression on the part of another nation. It stopped at the point where it said uh, "We can't do anything. We have no teeth. All that we can say is we will impose uh an economic embargo." And it [ER: Couldn't always be sure that the nations--] and it didn't even succeed in doing that. (6:02)

[ER:] That's true.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Now, the UN actually has taken the step that through a collective action, a public condemnation of an act of aggression, followed up by a request to its members to go and help the nation which is-is invaded. Uh they feel today that that is the only answer to curbing uh ambitious growth on the part of other nations, which I agree with.

[ER:] Curbing the aggressor, but doesn't it go even deeper than that? Isn't what really happened to the League um the fact that it abdicated in its--in making moral decisions? It um it decided that it could not uh say uh a thing was wrong because it couldn't physically prevent its happening. Now, I think one of the things which um will stand out in the present situation is that, on the whole, most of the nations uh have had the courage to say what they thought was right and wrong. Now, it's taken them, admittedly, without preparation, and um they have not been able to enforce it in the way that they would have enforced it if they had been fully organized to put down aggression quickly. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah.] But nevertheless, the moral value of a group--a large group, a majority group of nations saying, "This is right, and we stand for it," um I think probably is a basic thing, which um uh will stand out as a difference between the old league and the United Nations.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, well, [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] um I think also that the-the old League became almost just a sounding board, and that almost all of the member nations of the old League uh were motivated by [ER: Used it for political purposes.] political and selfish interests entirely. Uh--

[ER:] Well, that's why they said that it failed because we were not in it. Because they felt that we might have prevented that, as we were out of a great many of the type of intrigues that were coming up. I doubt if [Elliott Roosevelt: Of course--] we could have prevented it.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Of course, you might-you might say very easily at this very moment that uh that is precisely what the Soviet Union is trying to do with the UN right now.

[ER:] Well, of course it is.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And uh--

[ER:] It's what, after all, they did probably with the League. To a certain extent they were a-a part of it just the way Germany, [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] and--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh I would like to go into your uh answer to his third question, "Where are we going?" uh a little bit further. I feel that we are not bending every effort to prevent World War III. Um my reason for feeling that is this: I agree that we should strengthen ourselves and strengthen our allies, do everything possible to make our allies able and willing to fight for their own freedoms, but there is a-a very deep point that is still eh--we are not tackling head on, we are not going to the American people and explaining what the problem is. One of the primary reasons for the spread of communism, one of the primary reasons for war is hunger and disease, and we are not tackling on a mass basis the problem of licking in all parts of the world the question of hunger and the question of disease. Now admittedly, that is a-a tremendous undertaking, but it seems to me that sooner or later we've got to face up to it and got to say, "All right, we are going to dedicate ourselves and enlist people--" [ER: We can't--] "to hel--to fight--"

[ER:] We can't face up to it alone, dear. It has to be done through the United Nations. That's what the Point Four Program, if integrated with the United Nations, aims to do. We find great difficulty in getting from Congress authorization to spend money on this type of thing as long as they're spending so much money on military things. From my point of view, it's short-sighted. But you'll have to have the people in this country fully understanding that the two things have to go hand in hand before you get their representatives in Congress to see it. (11:08)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. Well, I am inclined to agree with you, but I think that uh a great many more people should be speaking out in public and saying exactly what you've just said, and uh and urging uh the people to force their congressman to take this up as a major issue and to see what could be done in connection with the UN to uh bring it about on a wide scale.

[ER:] Of course, we can't actually provide food. We have to help people to the point where they do it themselves. And uh that I think is um--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Naturally, we can't provide the food right out of the area of the United States [ER: No.] for all of the hungry areas of the world, but we certainly have the technical know-how to show [ER: To help other people how to uh do it.] the people--to show the other people how to do it.

[ER:] I quite agree with you there.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right, well I hope that that answers uh the gentleman, who signs his name Lloyd, uh answers his questions that he posed in the letter today.

(Break 12:20-12:28)

[ER:] Due to the great population growth and shifting of the past ten years, serious maladjustments have been created in the representative branch of our government. This has been made apparent the necessity--this has made apparent the necessity for complete redistricting of congressional seats throughout the nation. This can only be accomplished if the people understand the problem and the present discriminations and take an active part in demanding the reforms. With me as my guest today is the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, Congressman Emanuel Celler, Democrat from New York, who in February introduced in the House a bill covering this problem and who can tell us of the importance of such legislation. It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you Congressman Celler. (13:21)

[Emanuel Celler:] It is indeed a pleasure and most comforting to uh be across a table with you, Mrs. Roosevelt, to discuss this very important problem.

[ER:] Well, I'm very happy to have the opportunity, because there are certain questions that come up, and I think people don't understand very well. So first of all, I'd like to ask you what is the nature of your bill and just what does it do?

[Emanuel Celler:] Well, as you indicated in the inception of your remarks, uh the great uh growth in our population and its shifting from state to state eh in the past decade has created uh serious imbalances in the representative branch of our government. A large proportion of the congressional districts do not presently provide for just representation for their citizens. We have, for example, districts in which hundreds of thousands citizens are underrepresented and over-privileged districts where a congressman represents only a comparatively few people. For example, in six of our states today, the variations in population between the largest and smallest districts exceed four hundred thousand people. In Ohio, take one glaring example, you have one district where you have over 900,000 uh in population and in another district in Ohio only 167,000 persons. And then you have, beyond that, a congressman elected at large, not in a specific congressional district, but throughout the state, and he represents 7,800,000 persons. So you can see the-the inequity is so glaring as to demand uh changes appropriately by Congress. (15:18)

[ER:] Of course, originally, the idea was a small state and a big state would be equally represented by their senators but that your congressman would actually represent accurately the population. Wasn't that the original thought in-in--

[Emanuel Celler:] You-you-you state it uh quite eloquently and most uh properly. And um there should be no such thing as a congressman at large. Uh that uh violates the very idea of a truly [ER: Of --] representative government.

[ER:] Well, that's what I thought. I'd always uh understood that. But now your bill would correct this by doing what exactly?

[Emanuel Celler:] Um it would um uh set up certain standards that the states must follow. Those standards would be as follows: the districts to be carved out by the states would be contiguous, compact, and would be fairly equal in population. Uh of course you cannot get an exact equality in population. What are the standards--

[ER:] Now, can you compel the states to do this? (16:30)

[Emanuel Celler:] Yes, we have the right, strange as-as it may seem. The Congress not only has the authority to do it in the Const--uh by virtue of the Constitution, but I believe it has a duty to do it. Congress is given authority by the Constitution to pass legislation setting forth the manner in which districts shall be laid out by the states. Article I, Section IV provides, quote, "The times, places and manner of holding elections for senators and representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by law make or order such regulations, except as to the places of choosing the senators." End quote. So you see we, in Congress, have the right-- have the complete authority uh by virtue of that uh constitutional provision that I have read to go into the states and make, alter, change, or amend in any way we see fit uh whatever the states may do in that regard. And if states refuse to make the appropriate changes, [ER: You could refuse to seat the congressmen--] we could lash a whip, as it were. And we ha-can go beyond that. We would have the right--um and I do put, in that regard, teeth in my bill. If the state does not um follow the standards laid down by Congress, we have the right--and my bill so provides--to deny a congressman elected improperly his seat. And the clerk of the House shall be ordered to refuse to accept his credentials when he presents them. So you see that--

[ER:] That really puts teeth in the bill, doesn't it?

[Emanuel Celler:] Those are the sanctions that uh should set the states right. But I don't think that we would have to go that far. At least I hope we will not--will not have to go that far. Um if as a result of my bill um and a result of the hearings that will be conducted thereupon, a-a proper climate of public opinion is developed, I think that may be sufficient uh to indicate uh to the leaders of the various state legislatures on both sides of the aisle, Republicans as well as Democrats, that they must um redistrict their states along fair and equitable lines.

[ER:] Well now, how long is it since uh the state laws for congressional redis-redistricting have been made?

[Emanuel Celler:] Strange as it may seem, some of the states have not um redistricted and divided their territory for many and many years. Nevada's uh um uh state law goes back uh to the time of the Civil War--end of the Civil War, 1866. Arkansas hasn't made any changes for forty-nine years! [ER: Hmm.] It's like applying a-a-a horse and buggy uh statute to a jet-propelled era. Connecticut hasn't changed its statutes since 1931. That is nine--almo--over nineteen years ago. And many changes have occurred.

[ER:] Well now, in many of these states there were great changes in population in that time.

[Emanuel Celler:] There is no doubt about it.

[ER:] And great shifting to different areas in the state, I should think.

[Emanuel Celler:] Um Utah, Ohio haven't had any changes since 1913, that's eh just before the First World War. Louisiana goes back to 1912. And Maryland--think of this, Mrs. Roosevelt-- Maryland hasn't amen--hasn't made any changes in certain regards uh since the-the first administration of Grover Cleveland, 1888--1882. And New Hampshire goes back to the days also of fighting Indians, 1881. So you see there's need for a lot of house cleaning. (20:34)

[ER:] I should think there was need for some changes. You can't uh keep those same districts and have them really represent um the people um in--over a period of years like that. But I wonder if--

[Emanuel Celler:] I saw, Mrs. Roosevelt--it's interesting to note, a-a cartoon in the *Washington Post*. I think it was, uh was called, um in reference to these disparities, uh Washington Horse and Rabbit Stew: One Horse and One Rabbit.

[ER Laughs] I think that's a very good story. Well now, are the provisions of your bill enforceable, you think?

[Emanuel Celler:] I believe the provisions are enforceable. Um another section of the Constitution provides that uh the members of the House shall be the judge-judges to the fitness of their own members. Well now, if a member is-is elected on an-on a basis that is the result of gerrymandering and um shall I say political skullduggery, which is not--

[ER:] Would you like to explain what gerrymandering is? Because I think there may be some uh lack of understanding in our audience.

[Emanuel Celler:] Well, it goes back to uh to the early part of the century in the state of Massachusetts when a--incidentally a Republican politician by the name of [Elbridge] Gerry uh divided the state of Massachusetts so that only his henchmen uh could uh hold elective office. And um it was uh was a--it

was a stench in the nostrils of-of-of the good citizens, and they rose in rebellion as it were and um fought it off and effected, after some years of struggle, a change. But ever since that, where attempts have been made--

[ER:] It's called gerrymandering. I see. (22:33)

[Emanuel Celler:] It's called gerrymandering.

[ER:] I see. I-I didn't know myself how it had come about. That's very interesting. Well then, um that means that your bill would prevent, for instance, a uh um a districting which would be um done in the interest of any particular um party or any particular leader.

[Emanuel Celler:] Correct. And-and it results now -- uh um flying from so-called gerrymandering in many of the states uh gives you um districts that um-um from the map looks very-look very peculiar. Uh the contours of some look like the-the uh the hub and the spokes of a wheel. Right here in New York City, we have a district that surrounds uh Central Park, and it was deliberately carved out in the interests of a certain political party and a certain political candidate. And actually if you look at the contours of that district it is really the-the hub and the spokes of a wheel; the hub--the-the spokes uh jutting out in every conceivable direction.

[ER:] Why, I think that's very interesting, but just for a minute we'll have to stop our talk and let our announcer have a word.

(Break 23:50-24:00)

[ER:] Now we come back to our talk with Congressman Emanuel Celler on his bill which is before the Congress for redistricting, and-and um and I'm going to ask him uh whether this bill would actually change the number of congressmen from any particular state.

[Emanuel Celler:] My bill does not change the number of congressmen from any particular state. Um every ten years we have a census, and the president eh is uh empowered uh to determine from that census um what um number of representatives each state shall have. And the president has already indicated um that as a result of the census um there are to be certain changes in the various states as to the number of representatives. Uh sixteen states are-are affected. Um and I shall--it might be interesting if I just read [ER: Yes.] them off. [ER: Yes, I think it would.] Mhm, okay. It won't take long to do so. Um for example, um of the sixteen states, uh seven states gained representatives. California gained seven, Washington one, Texas one, Florida two, Virginia one, Maryland one, Michigan one. Nine states lose representatives. Oklahoma loses two, Arkansas one, Mississippi one, Tennessee one, Missouri two, Illinois one, Kentucky one, Pennsylvania three, and New York two. Now of course, um the states--in the states where there are these changes, there will be the necessity for making changes in their um reapportionment statutes. Um they could either, uh um uh if my bill doesn't go through, uh elect these new-new additional representatives at large. They could um elect some of them at large and redistrict portions of the state, or they could redistrict the entire state. I believe in -- where there are ad--where there is an additional congressman or a loss of-of seats, uh there should be a complete uh change and the entire state should of necessity be redistricting. And if they do not redistrict then my bill should come into play, and first uh um the-the moral suasion should re-re-that flo--should flow from it, should effect change. And if moral suasion does not have that effect, then we have to invoke the sanctions of my bill and compel the states to do a-a decent, fair, and equitable just job. (26:52)

[ER:] Well, now um would your bill as it stands omit the election of congressmen at large?

[Emanuel Celler:] My bill would not. My bill provides that a-that a districts must be contiguous, must be compact, and they must um provide for a-a fair degree of equality of population. For example, eh it provides and the state eh must be--the state's population is divided by number of congressmen allotted to it. That will give you the mean population. That's about roughly 350,000. Then I allow a variation, 15 percent above or 15 percent below 350,000. Say roughly 50,000 either way upwards or downwards. That would mean a district could not have, uh roughly speaking, more than 400,000, no less than 300,000. That would do away with the congressmen at large.

[ER:] Yes. Well, I think that is-is much more representative really and much better than having a congressmen at large. I've never thought congressmen at large made much sense because that seemed to be the Senate's posi--uh actually what the Senate was supposed to do. [Emanuel Celler: That's correct, Mrs. Roosevelt.] Well now, um some--I know that the states who are losing congressmen will probably feel very badly about it and will--I understand in fact that they started some agitation to increase membership of the House so that no state would lose a congressman. It would mean, however, in that case that their congressmen would represent fewer people. Now, um I-I wonder how you feel about and what uh what is your idea? Would you like to see the number of House members increased? (28:42)

[Emanuel Celler:] No, I-I do not. I'm-I'm very emphatic--I must be very emphatic about [ER coughs] that, Mrs. Roosevelt. I do not think that the membership of the House should be increased. We now have 435 members, and I would say even now that number is too unwieldy for comfort. Um I--any increase would make uh the House more cumbersome. Eh it would be unnecessarily costly, and it would have the result of reducing um individual participation in floor debate. Um, if you'll permit me, I would like to draw examp-- draw two examples of oversized houses. Um the house--the British House of Commons uh has 640 members. Uh the French National Assembly, which is the successor to the French Chamber Deputies, have 619 members. Now these um numbers -- 640 for the British, 619 for the French -- um are numbers which are too great um for the effective uh operation of a congress or a chamber of deputies or an assembly. The-the number stifles individual initiative, and uh I-I would say in-in a sense tortures the members into a state of imbecility. [ER laughs] That may be rather strong [ER: That's--], but I think that's true.

For example, in the French eh in the French National Assembly, because of the great numbers, there's great difficulty in preserving order. That may be due in part to the--to the um emotional qualities of the French character, but nonetheless um that emotional quality is aggravated by the great numbers. And the-the um the presiding officer, the equivalent of our Speaker, doesn't use a gavel. The gavel has been found during the years most ineffective because it doesn't make enough noise and cannot drown out the tumult. And he has a huge bell at his right and he raises his hand and rings this huge gong in the event of disorder, and if the turbulence does not cease, he rings a second time. If it doesn't ring a third time, he sounds that gong a third time. If then uh order is not restored, he puts on his hat uh which is equivalent to a warning that unless the uh the disorder is quelled he's going to leave the chamber. Then if it isn't--the order is not restored he actually does put--continues to keep on his hat and leaves the chamber. And then if order is not restored after that why the gendarmie are called in. Now what happens in the House of Commons because of the great number, 640, most of the members are so called bank--back benchers. There's no room for them, and-and in many instances, when they do come into the House of Commons, uh they must sit in the gallery uh as though they were non-participating spectators. Now, we don't want that situation developed in this country.

[ER:] No, I think it's very important keep it where we actually have room for our members and we also can hear them if they have anything to say. I think that--

[Emanuel Celler:] They should have the right to have their say.

[ER:] They should have the right to have their say.

[Emanuel Celler:] Now uh, if we will-if we will--if we would uh take care of every state that would lose as a result of the recent census, we would have to have a House of 509. Now, what would happen next ten years with the increase in population, you'll have another increase, you'll have wave upon wave of increase, and uh you'd have a situation where everybody would be representing and nobody would be represented.

[ER:] No, and as a matter of fact, it will mean that a congressman will gradually, probably, represent more people than he does today. He may have to be responsible for more people, but on the whole um I think that is healthier than having more representatives in Congress. Because it is easier for an individual congressman to represent a district, which he can cover um and moderately well get to know, than it is um to increase your number of congressmen and who really are non-participants in what goes on.

[Emanuel Celler:] As you-you stated um cogently and very well, Mrs. Roosevelt, and I'm in thorough accord with that observation. (33:27)

[ER:] Well now, I-I would like to know if you feel that you have enough votes to pass your bill, sir?

[Emanuel Celler:] Well, that-that's like asking uh the-the uh captain of a football team if he's going to win the game tomorrow. [ER laughs] He can only tell after the game is over. But I uh I have certain plans for um the uh passage of the bill. Um I've appointed -- a-as chairman-chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, I've planted a subcommittee uh headed by our distinguished colleague from the state of New York, um Mr. William T. Byrne of-of Albany, uh to head a subcommittee. And that subco-subcommittee is about to hold hearings, and they have already invited the forty-eight governors to come to Washington and state their views. And thereafter they will be invited likewise the leaders, Republicans and Democrats, of the state legislatures also to set forth observations on the bill.

[ER:] Well, uh you think that that will--um those will be hearings. Will there be public hearings so that people who are interested will-will be invited to come?

[Emanuel Celler:] Yes, indeed. There will be public hearings, and we intend to have some of those hearings in-in rather some of the sensitive parts of the country, the metropolitan areas um away from Washington and uh near -- nigh unto the grassroots, as it were. So that at firsthand the people get an idea what-what this is all about.

[ER:] I think that's very important, because I think it's important to get out throughout the country an understanding of what you really are trying to do. And I think it's only through public hearings you succeed in doing that.

[Emanuel Celler:] And uh the-the public then in turn can bring pressure upon any recusant or intransigent member of the House or Senate that doesn't view with favor what we are trying to do here.

[ER:] Well, I think that's very interesting, and I want to thank you so much for being with me today. And I'm sorry that we have to bring this talk to a close, but I hope it will have explained the bill and brought a great deal of interest to what is going to happen.

[Emanuel Celler:] Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Roosevelt. You have been very gracious to give me this opportunity to uh express my views.

(Break 35:36-35:42)

[ER:] Cancer is a major problem. The fight against it deserves major support. Join the 1951 Cancer Crusade of the American Cancer Society. Do your share in the fight by helping the ACS carry on its vital programs of research, service to the cancer patient, and education. Progress in the fight to control this disease is being made. More and more lives are being saved each year. In 1950, 70,000 persons with cancer were spared, but unless our efforts to cut down the death rates succeed, some twenty-two million Americans now living will die of cancer. Cancer control is as much your concern as the person's next door, down the block, or in the next town. This disease can strike anyone, man, woman, or child. Strike back. Guard your family. Give generously to your local unit of the American Cancer Society.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now it's time to close the program and to remind you that you've been listening to the Eleanor Roosevelt Program, which comes to you each Monday through Friday at this same time. And this is Elliott Roosevelt speaking and wishing you all good day.

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