

Politics as Usual by Diana Childress When polio paralyzed Franklin Roosevelt in August 1921, he put on a brave front. But when the Democratic presidential candidate, Al Smith, finally got him on the line, he realized he could no longer plead illness without letting his party down. Taking an active part in life, even if it tired him, was "better for his condition," they said. So she encouraged and helped him to stay involved in politics. Louis Howe, Franklin's longtime political adviser, added his support. Within days after falling ill, Franklin was dictating letters that he could not even sign because the paralysis had temporarily spread to his arms and thumbs. He agreed to become a member of the executive committee of the Democratic party in New York State even though at that time, as one biographer notes, he was lying in bed and "working for hours to try to wiggle a big toe". Franklin Roosevelt's return to active politics in spite of his inability to walk was a major triumph for himself and for disabled people everywhere. He never achieved full recovery, but his years of hard work brought a maturity and a depth of understanding that enhanced his greatness as a leader. Having learned from childhood to bear pain without fuss," he joked about a thirty-nine-year-old man getting a baby's disease and radiated optimism about his recovery. But as Franklin's wife. Eleanor, said later, "I know that he had real fear when he was first taken ill. Polio was a trial by fire. The agile man who had vaulted over a row of chairs to reach the speaker's platform in 1920 now inched painfully forward on crutches. Yet he kept busy on the sidelines, writing letters and articles while Howe and Eleanor appeared for him in public. Meanwhile, he worked feverishly to try to regain the use of his legs.