For the first sixty years of the Twentieth Century, the Executive Secretary was the primary spokesperson for the National Education Association, responsible for giving effect to the decisions of the policy-making bodies of the NEA, such as the Board of Trustees, Executive Committee, and Board of Directors. In 1972, a Constitutional Convention (Con-Con) was convened that altered how executives came into office, and how much influence the rank and file members would have. Among other changes, the President became the chief executive, policy officer, and official spokesperson for the Association. This change was both a symptom and a cause of changes happening inside the Association itself, as it shifted from one that prized professionalism above advocacy to one that embraced collective bargaining, and executive leadership shifted from mostly White men to one inclusive of women and minorities.

In the 1950s, a desire for increased dues led NEA to find new members in urban areas, whereas before membership was primarily rural. Many of these new members wanted more from their Association than what had traditionally been offered. Demands for more representation and stronger defense of teachers' rights began to wear away at the NEA's traditional hierarchy. In 1964, the Representative Assembly passed a resolution to study the structure of the Association. Nearly a decade later, those changes were finalized at Con-Con. This change was both a symptom and cause of a new direction in NEA; one that embraced collective bargaining and a more active role in political and social causes.