1944

Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Thomas E. Dewey

A 35-minute lesson on the 1944 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Franklin D. Roosevelt (Democratic) · 432 EV	RUNNER-UP Thomas E. Dewey (Republican) · 99 EV
KEY ISSUE World War II leadership; postwar planning; soldiers' voting rights	TURNOUT 55.9%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1944: Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Thomas E. Dewey

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a sitting president is sick during wartime, what political mechanisms protect continuity of leadership?
15 min	**Reading**	1944 election was 40th U.S. presidential election. Produced FDR's 432-99 electoral-vote victory over Republican Thomas Dewey - FDR's unprecedented fourth presidential election victory. FDR was first U.S. president to serve more than two terms. Election structurally shaped by WWII (which was approaching Allied victory but not yet over) and FDR's declining health (which he and his doctors concealed from voters). Political conditions were defined by wartime mobilization. By November 1944, U.S. had been at war 35 months. ~12 million Americans in military service. ~250,000 American military deaths by November 1944 (would reach 405,399 by war end). The June 6, 1944 D-Day invasion of Normandy had begun Allied liberation of Western Europe. The August 25, 1944 liberation of Paris had energized Allied morale. The October 1944 Battle of Leyte Gulf had broken Japanese naval power. The November 1944 Battle of the Bulge would not begin until December 16 (a structural German counterattack that briefly threatened Allied advances). FDR's health had deteriorated dramatically. He had been president since March 4, 1933 - over 11 and a half years. He had been paralyzed by polio since 1921 (age 39). His public mobility had always been limited (he wore leg braces and used a wheelchair, though press photographers never photographed his wheelchair use). By 1944 additional health problems: hypertension (blood pressure 200/110 - dangerously high); congestive heart failure; arteriosclerosis; chronic bronchitis from decades of cigarette smoking. His personal physician Admiral Ross McIntire publicly downplayed his health; the actual diagnosing physician Dr. Howard Bruenn knew FDR was dying but the diagnosis was kept secret. Voters did not know the extent of FDR's illness. Democratic National Convention met in Chicago July 19-21, 1944 and renominated FDR by acclamation. The structural question was vice president. Henry A. Wallace had been VP since January 20, 1941 and had been a controversial Progressive Republican (originally a Republican who switched to Democratic 1933). The conservative Democratic wing (Southern segregationists led by Senator Walter F. George of Georgia; party chair Robert E. Hannegan; Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr.; and others) strongly opposed Wallace because he was too liberal on civil rights

and economic redistribution. The 1944 nomination would effectively determine the next president (since FDR was dying though voters did not know it). FDR himself was politically ambivalent. He sent a letter June 6, 1944 saying he would "personally vote for" Wallace but would not "dictate to the convention." The Democratic Convention's structural choice was between Wallace, James Byrnes of South Carolina (FDR's "assistant president" coordinating wartime mobilization), and Harry Truman of Missouri (chair of the Senate Special Committee Investigating the National Defense Program, the "Truman Committee"). Wallace was unacceptable to Southern conservatives; Byrnes was unacceptable to Northern liberals and African Americans because of his segregationist record. Truman emerged as the compromise candidate - a Missouri senator with moderate political reputation, acceptable to both party wings. Truman was nominated on the second ballot. The compromise was structurally consequential: it determined the post-FDR presidency.

Republican National Convention met in Chicago June 26-28, 1944 and nominated Governor Thomas Dewey of New York on the first ballot. Dewey was 42 - the youngest major-party presidential nominee since Bryan 1896. He had been a famous racket-busting prosecutor in New York City during the 1930s (took down Lucky Luciano 1936, broke the Murder Inc. murder-for-hire ring). He had been District Attorney of New York County (1937-41) and was elected Governor of New York in 1942 (becoming the first Republican governor of NY in 20 years). He was confident, organized, and disciplined but personally stiff - the "groom on the wedding cake" joke would follow him through the 1944 and 1948 campaigns. Governor John Bricker of Ohio - a conservative isolationist - was VP. The Republican platform supported continued WWII prosecution; opposed New Deal expansion; supported tax reduction.

The campaign focused on FDR's wartime leadership and his health. Dewey's message: FDR had been in office too long; the New Deal had created excessive federal bureaucracy; FDR's health was suspect; younger leadership was needed. FDR's message: wartime continuity was essential; American voters should not "change horses in midstream"; his experienced leadership was navigating the war toward Allied victory.

The campaign's most famous moment was FDR's September 23, 1944 address to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in Washington. Republicans had been spreading the rumor that FDR had accidentally left his Scottie dog Fala in the Aleutian Islands during a Pacific tour, then sent a Navy destroyer back to retrieve the dog at taxpayer expense (Republican estimates ranged from $2M to $20M). FDR responded with humor: "These Republican leaders have not been content with attacks on me, or my wife, or on my sons. No, not content with that, they now include my little dog, Fala. Well, of course, I don't resent attacks, and my family don't resent attacks, but Fala does resent them. You know, Fala is Scotch, and being a Scottie, as soon as he learned that the Republican fiction writers in Congress and out had concocted a story that I had left him behind on an Aleutian Island and had sent a destroyer back to find him - at a cost to the taxpayers of two or three or eight or

twenty million dollars - his Scotch soul was furious. He has not been the same dog since." The speech demonstrated FDR's political skills remained sharp despite his declining health. Dewey was forced to respond defensively about the Fala claim; the campaign became structurally focused on Dewey's ineffective rebuttal.

FDR's campaign appearances were limited due to health. His October 21, 1944 New York campaign tour (riding in an open car through a heavy rain for four hours to demonstrate vigor) was widely covered. His health remained a structural issue throughout.

FDR won 432 electoral votes to Dewey's 99. FDR carried 36 states; Dewey carried 12 states. The popular vote: FDR 25,612,916 (53.4%); Dewey 22,017,929 (45.9%); Thomas (Socialist) 79,017 (0.2%); Watson (Prohibition) 74,758 (0.2%); minor candidates. FDR-Dewey popular-vote margin: 3,594,987 - the smallest of FDR's four victories.

The geographic pattern showed Dewey strength in the rural Midwest, Plains, and New England. Dewey carried Colorado, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Vermont, Wisconsin, Wyoming. FDR's 36 states included the Solid South, the Mid-Atlantic, most of the Midwest (except IN, IA, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI), the Mountain West (except CO, WY), the West Coast, and New England (except ME, VT). The 1944 map was structurally similar to 1940 but with a slight Republican shift.

FDR was inaugurated to a fourth term on January 20, 1945 - a brief outdoor ceremony on the South Portico of the White House (the wartime austerity replaced the traditional East Portico Capitol ceremony). FDR's inaugural address was approximately 6 minutes long - one of the shortest in U.S. history.

FDR's fourth-term agenda focused on wartime prosecution and post-war planning. February 4-11, 1945 Yalta Conference (FDR + Churchill + Stalin) addressed post-war international organization, German occupation, Soviet entry into the Pacific war, and Polish boundary and government questions. The Yalta agreements would be controversial: critics argued FDR had been too accommodating to Stalin; defenders argued the agreements reflected the structural military reality of Soviet control over Eastern Europe.

FDR died April 12, 1945 at Warm Springs, Georgia (where he was vacationing at his "Little White House") from a cerebral hemorrhage. He had been president 12 years 31 days. Vice President Harry Truman was sworn in as the 33rd president that evening. Truman would: (1) Authorize the August 6 + 9, 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings ending WWII. (2) Lead the U.S. through the post-war reconstruction. (3) Articulate the Truman Doctrine March 1947 (containment of Communism). (4) Sign the Marshall Plan April 1948 ($13B European economic reconstruction). (5) Sign the NATO Treaty April 1949 (collective defense alliance).

		(6) Win the 1948 election in a famous upset over Dewey. (7) Lead the U.S. through the Korean War 1950-53. The 1944 election's structural significance was threefold. First, FDR became the only U.S. president to serve more than two terms - a feat that would not be repeated due to the 1951 22nd Amendment. Second, the 1944 vice-presidential selection (Truman over Wallace and Byrnes) was structurally consequential because it determined the post-FDR presidency. Third, FDR's 1944-45 wartime leadership (Yalta, Manhattan Project, UN founding planning) shaped the post-war international order. Germany surrendered May 8, 1945 (V-E Day) - 26 days after FDR's death. Japan surrendered September 2, 1945 (V-J Day) - after the August 6 Hiroshima and August 9 Nagasaki atomic bombings. The Cold War would begin within weeks of WWII's end with the structural disagreement between U.S. and Soviet Union over Eastern Europe and Germany.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1944 Election

1944 election was 40th U.S. presidential election. Produced FDR's 432-99 electoral-vote victory over Republican Thomas Dewey - FDR's unprecedented fourth presidential election victory. FDR was first U.S. president to serve more than two terms. Election structurally shaped by WWII (which was approaching Allied victory but not yet over) and FDR's declining health (which he and his doctors concealed from voters).

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Germany surrendered May 8, 1945 (V-E Day) - 26 days after FDR's death. Japan surrendered September 2, 1945 (V-J Day) - after the August 6 Hiroshima and August 9 Nagasaki atomic bombings. The Cold War would begin within weeks of WWII's end with the structural disagreement between U.S. and Soviet Union over Eastern Europe and Germany.

Key words

Thomas Dewey	NY Governor (1943-55) and 1944 Republican presidential nominee (also 1948). Former NYC racket-busting prosecutor; took down Lucky Luciano 1936. 42 years old in 1944 - youngest major-party nominee since Bryan 1896. Famous "groom on the wedding cake" appearance. Lost 1944 to FDR 432-99 EV; would lose 1948 to Truman.
Harry S. Truman	33rd U.S. president (1945-53). Missouri senator (1935-45). Chair of Truman Committee investigating WWII defense contracts. FDR's 1944 VP. Succeeded April 12, 1945. Authorized atomic bombings ending WWII. Articulated Truman Doctrine 1947, Marshall Plan 1948, NATO 1949.

Fala speech	FDR's September 23, 1944 address to Teamsters Union. FDR mocked Republican claims he had sent a destroyer to retrieve his Scottie dog Fala from the Aleutians. Demonstrated FDR's political skills remained sharp despite declining health.
D-Day	June 6, 1944 Allied invasion of Normandy. 156,000 American, British, Canadian troops on five beaches (Utah, Omaha, Gold, Juno, Sword). ~4,400 Allied dead. Operation Overlord commanded by Eisenhower. Began Allied liberation of Western Europe.
Yalta Conference	February 4-11, 1945 wartime conference at Yalta, Crimea between FDR, Churchill, Stalin. Addressed post-war international organization, German occupation zones, Soviet entry into Pacific war, Polish boundary and government questions. Controversial agreements regarding Soviet control of Eastern Europe.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did FDR win in 1944?

( ) A. 419
( ) B. 432
( ) C. 449
( ) D. 472

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

When did FDR die?

( ) A. January 20, 1945
( ) B. April 12, 1945
( ) C. May 8, 1945
( ) D. September 2, 1945

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was the 1944 VP selection (Truman over Wallace and Byrnes) structurally consequential?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Fala speech and why was it politically effective?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

432. FDR 432; Dewey 99. FDR's 333-EV margin was reduced from his prior victories but still decisive.

AP students should know the 432-99 split.

QUESTION 2

April 12, 1945. FDR died at Warm Springs, Georgia of cerebral hemorrhage. He had been president 12 years 31 days. Vice President Harry Truman was sworn in as 33rd president that evening. FDR's death came 82 days into his fourth term and 26 days before Germany's V-E Day surrender (May 8, 1945).

AP students should know the April 12, 1945 death date.

QUESTION 3

The 1944 VP selection (Truman over Wallace and Byrnes) was structurally consequential because it effectively determined the post-FDR presidency. FDR's health was declining; his personal physician knew he was dying but the diagnosis was kept secret. The 1944 VP would likely become president before the four-year term ended. Two structural reasons Truman emerged as compromise: (1) Henry Wallace (incumbent VP 1941-45) was too liberal for the conservative Democratic wing. Wallace had been a Progressive Republican who switched to Democratic 1933. Southern segregationists opposed him on civil rights; conservative Democrats opposed him on economic redistribution. (2) James Byrnes of South Carolina (FDR's "assistant president" coordinating wartime mobilization) was too segregationist for Northern liberals and African Americans. Byrnes had been a vocal segregationist senator (1931-41) and his nomination would have alienated the Northern New Deal coalition. Truman was the compromise: Missouri senator with moderate political reputation; acceptable to Southern Democrats (Missouri is a Border State) and Northern Democrats (Truman had supported New Deal programs). His chairmanship of the Truman Committee investigating WWII defense contracts had earned him bipartisan respect. The selection was the most consequential VP selection in U.S. history: Truman would become president, authorize the atomic bombings, articulate Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, sign NATO Treaty, and lead Korean War.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance.

QUESTION 4

The Fala speech was FDR's September 23, 1944 address to the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in Washington. Republicans had been spreading the rumor that FDR had accidentally left his Scottie dog Fala in the Aleutian Islands during a Pacific tour, then sent a Navy destroyer back to retrieve the dog at taxpayer expense (Republican estimates ranged from $2M to $20M). FDR responded with humor and aggressive defense: "These Republican leaders have not been content with attacks on me, or my wife, or on my sons. No, not content with that, they now include my little dog, Fala... You know, Fala is Scotch, and being a Scottie, as soon as he learned that the Republican fiction writers in Congress and out had concocted a story that I had left him behind on an Aleutian Island and had sent a destroyer back to find him - at a cost to the taxpayers of two or three or eight or twenty million dollars - his Scotch soul was furious." The speech was politically effective in three ways: (1) It demonstrated FDR's political skills remained sharp despite his declining health - addressing structural concerns about his fitness. (2) It mocked Republican attacks as petty and unworthy. (3) It forced Dewey to respond defensively about the Fala claim; the campaign became structurally focused on Dewey's ineffective rebuttal. The speech is widely cited as one of the most politically effective campaign moments of the 20th century.

AP students should be able to articulate the Fala speech.