3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1948

Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

A 35-minute lesson on the 1948 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Harry S. Truman (Democratic) · 303 EV	RUNNER-UP Thomas E. Dewey (Republican) · 189 EV
KEY ISSUE Civil rights; postwar economy; Cold War with the Soviet Union; New Deal continuation	TURNOUT 52.2%

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

1948: Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When polls and newspapers are confident about an election outcome but the result is the opposite, what does that reveal about polling methodology and political analysis?
15 min	**Reading**	1948 election was 41st U.S. presidential election. Produced Harry S. Truman's 303-189-39 electoral-vote victory over Republican Thomas Dewey and Dixiecrat Strom Thurmond - widely cited as biggest upset in U.S. presidential history. Truman had been universally expected to lose to Dewey; polls predicted Dewey landslide; Chicago Tribune printed "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline before all votes counted. Truman pulled off the upset through aggressive whistle-stop campaigning against the "do-nothing Republican Congress." Political conditions had been transformed by Truman's post-WWII presidency. Truman had succeeded FDR on April 12, 1945. He had: (1) Authorized the August 6 + 9, 1945 atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki ending WWII. (2) Led U.S. through post-WWII reconstruction. (3) Signed the United Nations Charter June 1945. (4) Articulated the Truman Doctrine March 1947. (5) Signed the Marshall Plan April 1948. (6) Recognized the State of Israel May 14, 1948 (within minutes of Israeli declaration of independence). (7) Begun the June 1948 Berlin Airlift in response to Soviet blockade. Domestic conditions had been turbulent. The 1945-46 reconversion to civilian economy produced labor strikes (~5 million workers struck in 1946 alone). The November 1946 midterm elections produced Republican gains of 55 House seats and 12 Senate seats - first Republican Congress since 1932. The Republican 80th Congress (1947-49) passed the Taft-Hartley Act June 1947 (over Truman's veto) limiting union power. The 1947-48 federal employee loyalty program (Executive Order 9835) screened federal employees for "subversive" connections - producing structural McCarthyism precursor concerns. Democratic Party was split three ways. (1) Truman moderate Democrats. (2) Henry Wallace Progressive Party (left wing). Wallace had been FDR's VP 1941-45 (dropped from 1944 ticket for Truman) and Truman's Secretary of Commerce until September 1946 (fired by Truman for criticizing U.S. Soviet policy). Wallace bolted to form the Progressive Party December 1947. The 1948 Progressive Platform: accommodation with Soviet Union; opposition to Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan; expanded New Deal; civil rights. Wallace would win 1,157,328 popular votes (2.4%) but 0 EV. (3) Strom Thurmond Dixiecrats (right wing). The 1948 Democratic National Convention (Philadelphia July 12-15) adopted a civil rights plank driven by Hubert Humphrey's passionate July 14 speech ("the time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party

to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights"). Mississippi and Alabama delegations walked out. The States' Rights Democratic Party (Dixiecrats) was formed July 17 in Birmingham, Alabama. Nominated Thurmond (Governor of South Carolina). Dixiecrats would win 1,175,930 popular votes (2.4%) and 39 EV (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, plus 1 EV from Tennessee where Thurmond was on the ballot as a "Democratic" candidate).

The three-way Democratic split looked structurally fatal for Truman. Polls predicted Dewey would win easily. Republican fundraising approximately $5.7M; Democratic ~$2.6M. Newsweek polled 50 leading political reporters: 50 predicted Dewey would win. The Roper Poll for Fortune magazine stopped polling in September because Dewey's lead was so large.

Republican National Convention met in Philadelphia June 21-25, 1948 and renominated Thomas Dewey on the third ballot over Senator Robert Taft of Ohio and former Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen. Earl Warren - California Governor (1943-53) and 1948 internationalist - was VP. The Republican platform attacked Truman administration; supported domestic regulatory reduction; supported continued Cold War policy.

Democratic National Convention met in Philadelphia July 12-15, 1948 and renominated Truman by acclamation. Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky was VP. The convention's civil rights plank produced the Dixiecrat walkout - structurally consequential for Southern Democratic politics.

Truman's campaign strategy was structural: attack the Republican Congress (which was easier than defending his own record). Truman called the 80th Congress back into special session July 26, 1948 - the "Turnip Day Session" (named after a Missouri saying "On the 25th of July, sow your turnips, wet or dry"). Truman dared Republicans to pass their 1948 platform. Republicans refused to act. Truman pounded them as obstructionist throughout his whistle-stop tour.

The whistle-stop tour was Truman's 1948 31,000-mile cross-country train tour. 271 speeches from rear platform of train car (Ferdinand Magellan). Began Labor Day September 6, 1948. The "whistle-stop" name came from Republican Senator Robert Taft's September dismissal: "Truman is blackguarding Congress at every whistle stop in the West." Truman adopted the term. Famous Truman lines: "Give 'em hell, Harry!" (audience shout; Truman: "I don't give them hell. I just tell the truth, and they think it's hell"); "It's a do-nothing, good-for-nothing Republican 80th Congress."

Dewey's campaign was structural error. He treated the campaign as already won - delivering bland speeches ("the future lies ahead"); refusing to attack Truman; avoiding controversy. Dewey's strategy was to "run out the clock" given his polling lead. The strategy ignored that Truman's campaigning was structurally shifting the

race.

Election Night November 2, 1948 was structurally chaotic. Polls had predicted Dewey landslide. Truman went to bed at the Elms Hotel in Excelsior Springs, Missouri thinking he might lose. The Chicago Tribune printed an early edition with the front-page headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" based on polling predictions. The headline was printed at 8 PM before all votes counted. By 4 AM Eastern Time November 3, Truman had won Ohio and Illinois - putting him over 266 EV. Truman was awakened at 4:30 AM to learn he had won.

Truman won 303 electoral votes; Dewey 189; Thurmond 39. The popular vote: Truman 24,179,347 (49.6%); Dewey 21,991,292 (45.1%); Thurmond 1,175,930 (2.4%); Wallace 1,157,328 (2.4%); minor candidates. Truman-Dewey popular-vote margin: 2,188,055 - close but decisive.

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Truman carried 28 states; Dewey 16 states; Thurmond 4 (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina). Truman carried the rest of the Solid South (despite the civil rights plank); the Midwest (except Indiana, Michigan, New Hampshire); the Mountain West; California; and Massachusetts. Dewey carried the Northeast (except MA, CT, RI), the rural Midwest, and Iowa, Nebraska. Truman lost his home state of Missouri's neighbors (Iowa, Kansas) but carried Missouri itself.

The famous photograph: November 4, 1948 at St. Louis Union Station. Truman returning to Washington by train. He held up the Chicago Tribune's November 3 early edition with the "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline. The photograph (taken by W. Eugene Smith for Life magazine, with similar photos by others) became iconic - a symbol of polling failure and unexpected political upsets.

Truman was inaugurated to his own term on January 20, 1949. The January 20, 1949 inaugural address articulated the Truman Doctrine framework: "Point Four" - U.S. technical and economic aid to developing countries to combat Communism. Subsequent achievements: April 1949 NATO Treaty; June 1950 - July 1953 Korean War; 1948 Berlin Airlift (continued until May 1949).

The 1948 election's structural significance was fourfold. First, it confirmed Truman as a structural Cold War leader. Second, the Dixiecrat revolt was the first major Southern Democratic break with the national party - foreshadowing the 1960s civil rights realignment. Third, the polling failure produced a structural reform of U.S. polling methodology (the 1948 polls had relied on quota sampling which structurally biased results). Fourth, Truman's upset victory established the structural model for "underdog" presidential campaigns (subsequent comparable upsets: Reagan over Carter 1980; Trump over Clinton 2016).

Truman's 1949-53 presidency would include: Korean War 1950-53; firing of General

		MacArthur April 1951 (for insubordination); McCarthyism rise (1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist demagoguery); 1950 NSC-68 (Cold War strategy document); 1952 hydrogen bomb test. Truman declined to run in 1952; his approval rating had fallen to 22% by January 1952 due to the Korean War stalemate and political scandals.
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 1948 Election

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Key words

"Dewey Defeats Truman"	Famous November 3, 1948 Chicago Tribune front-page headline printed before all votes counted. Based on polls predicting Dewey landslide. Truman held up the wrong-headline newspaper at St. Louis Union Station November 4, 1948 - photo became iconic.
Whistle-stop tour	Truman's 1948 31,000-mile cross-country train tour. 271 speeches from rear platform. The "whistle-stop" name came from Senator Robert Taft's September dismissal: "Truman is blackguarding Congress at every whistle stop in the West." Truman adopted the term.
Dixiecrats	The 1948 segregationist Southern Democratic third party (States' Rights Democratic Party). Bolted from 1948 Democratic National Convention after civil rights plank adopted. Nominated Strom Thurmond. Won 39 EV in 4 Deep South states + 2.4% popular vote. First major Southern Democratic break with national party.
"Do-nothing Congress"	Truman's 1948 campaign attack on Republican-controlled 80th Congress. Truman called Congress back into special "Turnip Day Session" July 26, 1948 daring them to pass their 1948 Republican platform. Congress refused. Truman pounded them as obstructionist.

Henry Wallace Progressive Party	The 1948 left-wing third party. Wallace had been FDR's VP 1941-45 and Truman's Secretary of Commerce until September 1946. The 1948 Progressive Platform: accommodation with Soviet Union; opposition to Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan. Wallace won 1,157,328 popular votes (2.4%) but 0 EV.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Harry Truman win in 1948?

( ) A. 273
( ) B. 286
( ) C. 303
( ) D. 321

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Strom Thurmond (Dixiecrat) win in 1948?

( ) A. 27
( ) B. 39
( ) C. 54
( ) D. 78

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline and why is it famous?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Dixiecrat revolt foreshadow the 1960s civil rights realignment?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

303. Truman 303; Dewey 189; Thurmond 39. Truman's 114-EV margin over Dewey was decisive despite predictions of a Dewey landslide.

AP students should know the 303-189-39 split.

QUESTION 2

39. Strom Thurmond (Dixiecrat) carried 4 Deep South states: Alabama (11 EV), Louisiana (10 EV), Mississippi (9 EV), South Carolina (8 EV), plus 1 EV from Tennessee (where Thurmond was on the ballot as a "Democratic" candidate). Total 39 EV. The 1948 Dixiecrat result foreshadowed the 1960s civil rights realignment.

AP students should know the 39-EV Thurmond figure.

QUESTION 3

"Dewey Defeats Truman" was the Chicago Tribune's November 3, 1948 front-page headline. The Tribune's early edition was printed at 8 PM before all votes counted, based on polls predicting Dewey landslide. By 4 AM Eastern Time November 3, Truman had won Ohio and Illinois - putting him over 266 EV. The headline was wrong. Truman returned to Washington by train November 4, 1948. At St. Louis Union Station, he held up the wrong-headline Tribune for photographers. The photograph (taken by W. Eugene Smith for Life magazine, with similar photos by others) became iconic. The headline became a symbol of: (1) polling failure (the 1948 polls had relied on quota sampling which structurally biased results); (2) unexpected political upsets; (3) the danger of premature media judgments. The phrase "Dewey Defeats Truman" remains a cultural shorthand for confidently wrong predictions.

AP students should be able to articulate the headline's significance.

QUESTION 4

The 1948 Dixiecrat revolt foreshadowed the 1960s civil rights realignment in five structural ways: (1) First major Southern Democratic break with the national party since Reconstruction. Southern Democrats had been loyal to the national party for 80+ years. The 1948 walkout demonstrated that civil rights commitments could break the Solid South. (2) Specific 1948 trigger was federal civil rights legislation: Hubert Humphrey's passionate July 14, 1948 speech ("the time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights") + Truman's July 26, 1948 Executive Order 9981 desegregating armed forces. (3) Geographic pattern of revolt was structurally consistent with later realignment: 4 Deep South states (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina) - the states most resistant to federal civil rights would later defect to Republicans in 1964 (after Goldwater's Civil Rights Act opposition) and 1968 (Wallace's segregationist Independent campaign). (4) Strom Thurmond himself would later switch to the Republican Party in 1964 - personally tracing the structural path. (5) The 1948 Dixiecrat platform foreshadowed the 1968 Wallace platform and the 1968 Nixon "Southern Strategy." The cumulative trajectory: 1948 Dixiecrat 39 EV ’ 1968 Wallace 46 EV ’ 1972 Nixon all 50 states (49 if you exclude DC). The Solid South had moved from Democratic to Republican within 24 years of the 1948 revolt.

AP students should be able to articulate the realignment trajectory.