1948

Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

A 50-minute lesson on the 1948 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1948: Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two structural conditions in 1946-48 America that would produce a confident prediction of Dewey victory. For each identify the specific 1946-48 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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; polls predicted Dewey landslide; Chicago Tribune printed "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline before all votes counted. Political conditions had been transformed by Truman's post-WWII presidency. Truman had succeeded FDR April 12, 1945. He had: (1) Authorized August 6 + 9, 1945 atomic bombings ending WWII. (2) Led U.S. through post-WWII reconstruction. (3) Signed UN Charter June 1945. (4) Articulated Truman Doctrine March 1947. (5) Signed Marshall Plan April 1948. (6) Recognized Israel May 14, 1948. (7) Begun June 1948 Berlin Airlift. Domestic conditions turbulent. 1945-46 reconversion produced labor strikes (~5M workers struck in 1946 alone). November 1946 midterm: Republicans gained 55 House + 12 Senate seats - first Republican Congress since 1932. Republican 80th Congress passed Taft-Hartley Act June 1947 (over Truman veto) limiting union power. 1947-48 federal employee loyalty program (EO 9835) screened federal employees for "subversive" connections. Democratic Party split three ways: (1) Truman moderates. (2) Henry Wallace Progressive Party (left). Wallace had been FDR's VP 1941-45 and Truman's Secretary of Commerce until September 1946 (fired by Truman for criticizing U.S. Soviet policy). Bolted to form Progressive Party December 1947. Platform: accommodation with Soviet Union; opposition to Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan. Won 1,157,328 votes (2.4%); 0 EV. (3) Strom Thurmond Dixiecrats (right). Bolted from 1948 Democratic Convention (Philadelphia July 12-15) after civil rights plank adopted - 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. States' Rights Democratic Party formed July 17 in Birmingham. Nominated SC Governor Strom Thurmond. Won 1,175,930 votes (2.4%) + 39 EV (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina + 1 EV Tennessee).

Three-way Democratic split looked structurally fatal. Polls predicted Dewey landslide. Republican fundraising ~$5.7M; Democratic ~$2.6M. Newsweek polled 50 leading political reporters: 50 predicted Dewey win. Roper Poll for Fortune stopped polling September because Dewey lead was so large.

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

Democratic National Convention Philadelphia July 12-15, 1948 renominated Truman by acclamation. Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky VP. Convention's civil rights plank produced Dixiecrat walkout.

Truman's campaign strategy: attack Republican Congress (easier than defending his own record). Called 80th Congress back into special "Turnip Day Session" July 26, 1948 (named after Missouri saying "On the 25th of July, sow your turnips, wet or dry"). Dared Republicans to pass 1948 platform. Republicans refused. Truman pounded them as obstructionist.

July 26, 1948 Executive Order 9981 desegregated U.S. armed forces. Politically risky given Dixiecrat threat but structurally significant - first major federal civil rights action since Reconstruction.

Whistle-stop tour was 1948 31,000-mile cross-country train tour. 271 speeches from rear platform of Ferdinand Magellan train car. Began Labor Day September 6, 1948. "Whistle-stop" name from Senator Taft's September dismissal: "Truman is blackguarding Congress at every whistle stop in the West." Truman adopted term. Famous 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. Treated campaign as already won - bland speeches ("the future lies ahead"); refused to attack Truman; avoided controversy. "Run out the clock" strategy. Ignored that Truman's campaigning was structurally shifting the race.

Election Night November 2, 1948 chaotic. Truman went to bed at the Elms Hotel in Excelsior Springs, Missouri thinking he might lose. Chicago Tribune printed early edition with "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline at 8 PM before all votes counted. By

4 AM Eastern Time November 3 Truman won Ohio and Illinois - over 266 EV. Truman awakened 4:30 AM to learn he had won.

Truman won 303 EV; Dewey 189; Thurmond 39. 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 margin: 2,188,055.

Geographic pattern: Truman carried 28 states; Dewey 16; Thurmond 4. Truman won rest of Solid South (despite civil rights plank); Midwest (except IN, MI); Mountain West; California; Massachusetts. Dewey carried Northeast (except MA, RI), rural Midwest, Iowa, Nebraska.

November 4, 1948 St. Louis Union Station photograph: Truman holding up Chicago Tribune's November 3 early edition with "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline. Photo became iconic.

Truman inaugurated to his own term January 20, 1949. January 20, 1949 inaugural articulated "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).

1948 election's structural significance fourfold: (1) Confirmed Truman as structural Cold War leader. (2) Dixiecrat revolt first major Southern Democratic break with national party - foreshadowed 1960s civil rights realignment. (3) Polling failure produced structural reform of U.S. polling methodology. (4) Truman's upset established structural model for "underdog" campaigns.

Truman 1949-53 presidency: Korean War 1950-53; firing of General MacArthur April 1951; McCarthyism rise; 1950 NSC-68 (Cold War strategy); 1952 hydrogen bomb test. Truman declined to run in 1952; his approval rating fell to 22% by January 1952.

1948 polling failure produced structural methodology reforms. Gallup, Roper, and other major pollsters had used "quota sampling" - selecting respondents to match demographic targets. The method structurally biased toward Republican voters (who were more accessible to interviewers). After 1948, pollsters shifted to "probability sampling" with random selection. Major changes: (1) Random-digit dialing for telephone polls (developed 1960s). (2) Probability-proportional-to-size sampling. (3) Stratification by demographic and geographic variables. The 1948 polling failure was structurally similar to the 1936 Literary Digest failure - both reflected sampling bias that systematically over-represented one party's voters.

10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.

10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

Background

Before the worksheet, review the key terms below and then read the primary source carefully. The two source-analysis questions on the worksheet (questions 6 and 7) ask you to quote from the excerpt.

Key terms

"Dewey Defeats Truman"

Famous November 3, 1948 Chicago Tribune headline printed before all votes counted. Truman held up the wrong-headline newspaper at St. Louis Union Station November 4, 1948 - photo became iconic.

Dixiecrats

1948 segregationist Southern Democratic third party (States' Rights Democratic Party). Bolted from 1948 Democratic Convention after civil rights plank adopted. Nominated Strom Thurmond. Won 39 EV + 2.4% popular vote.

Henry Wallace Progressive Party

1948 left-wing third party. Wallace had been FDR's VP 1941-45 and Truman's Secretary of Commerce until September 1946. Won 1,157,328 votes (2.4%); 0 EV.

Berlin Airlift

June 24, 1948 - May 12, 1949 U.S./British operation supplying West Berlin by air after Soviet ground blockade. 277,569 flights delivered 2.3M tons of supplies. Demonstrated Western commitment to Berlin. Soviets lifted blockade May 12, 1949.

Whistle-stop tour

Truman's 1948 31,000-mile cross-country train tour. 271 speeches from rear platform of Ferdinand Magellan train car. "Whistle-stop" name from Senator Taft's September dismissal of Truman.

"Do-nothing Congress"

Truman's 1948 attack on Republican-controlled 80th Congress. Called Congress back into special "Turnip Day Session" July 26, 1948.

Executive Order 9981

July 26, 1948 Truman order desegregating U.S. armed forces. Politically risky given Dixiecrat threat but structurally significant - first major federal civil rights action since Reconstruction. Operationalized 1948-54.

Address Before the National Convention of the American Legion

HARRY S. TRUMAN, AUGUST 14, 1948

Truman delivered this address to the American Legion National Convention in Miami on August 14, 1948 - approximately 11 weeks before Election Day. The speech was Truman's structural attack on the "do-nothing 80th Congress" - the campaign theme he would carry through his whistle-stop tour. The "I propose" passage demonstrated Truman's strategy: list specific policies that the Republican-controlled Congress had refused to pass; force Republicans to defend their inaction. The strategy was politically effective: Republican congressional leaders found themselves on the defensive throughout the September-October 1948 campaign. The structural lesson: a presidential candidate facing a hostile Congress can turn the Congress into a campaign target rather than a constraint.

> *"I propose to point out the fact that the Eightieth Congress is the worst Congress - except one - that I ever saw in my life. The Eightieth Congress was a do-nothing Congress. The Eightieth Congress was elected on the strength of a slogan that the Republicans were going to clean up Communism in the executive branch, that they were going to repeal the Taft-Hartley Act, that they were going to do all sorts of things to help the people of this country. Well, the Taft-Hartley Act was passed all right - by the Eightieth Congress, over my veto - but it was passed against the working people of this country. Are these things which I am stating against the Eightieth Congress true or untrue? You answer it. I think they are absolutely true."*

Truman, "Address Before the National Convention of the American Legion" (Miami, August 14, 1948). Public domain.

The 1948 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

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

Truman says "The Eightieth Congress is the worst Congress - except one - that I ever saw in my life." What is the rhetorical strategy?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1948 election map, identify Truman's 28 states, Dewey's 16 states, and Thurmond's 4 Deep South states. What does the geographic pattern reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

303. Truman 303; Dewey 189; Thurmond 39.

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

QUESTION 2

39. Thurmond carried 4 Deep South states + 1 EV from Tennessee.

AP students should know the 39-EV Thurmond figure.

QUESTION 3

"Dewey Defeats Truman" was the Chicago Tribune's November 3, 1948 early-edition headline. Printed at 8 PM before all votes counted, based on polls predicting Dewey landslide. By 4 AM EST November 3, Truman had won. Truman held up the wrong-headline newspaper at St. Louis Union Station November 4, 1948. Photo by W. Eugene Smith for Life magazine became iconic - symbol of polling failure, unexpected political upsets, and danger of premature media judgments. The phrase remains cultural shorthand for confidently wrong predictions.

AP students should be able to articulate the headline.

QUESTION 4

Truman's "worst Congress - except one" articulates aggressive attack rhetoric. The "except one" was a humorous reference to the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act Congress, which had passed the slavery-extending Act over Truman's political ancestors' opposition. The rhetorical strategy: (1) Reduce Truman's political risk by attacking Congress rather than defending his record. (2) Force Republican defensive responses about why the 80th Congress had failed to act. (3) Mobilize Democratic base voters concerned about Republican obstruction. (4) Use humor to make attacks memorable rather than bitter. (5) Frame Republican inaction as moral failure. The structural lesson: presidential campaigns facing hostile Congresses can attack the Congress rather than defend the administration. Truman's 1948 campaign was the model for subsequent "do-nothing Congress" attacks (Clinton 1996; Obama 2012).

AP students should be able to articulate the strategy.

QUESTION 5

The 1948 Dixiecrat revolt foreshadowed the 1960s civil rights realignment in five structural ways: (1) First major Southern Democratic break with national party since Reconstruction. Southern Democrats had been loyal 80+ years. (2) 1948 trigger was federal civil rights: Humphrey's July 14 speech + Truman's July 26 EO 9981 desegregating armed forces. (3) Geographic pattern was structurally consistent with later realignment: 4 Deep South states (AL, LA, MS, SC) - states most resistant to federal civil rights would later defect to Republicans 1964 (Goldwater) and 1968 (Wallace). (4) Strom Thurmond himself switched to Republican Party 1964 - personally tracing the path. (5) 1948 Dixiecrat platform foreshadowed 1968 Wallace platform and 1968 Nixon "Southern Strategy." Trajectory: 1948 Dixiecrat 39 EV ’ 1968 Wallace 46 EV ’ 1972 Nixon all 50 states. Solid South moved from Democratic to Republican within 24 years.

AP students should be able to articulate the realignment.

QUESTION 6

Truman states (28): Solid South except 4 Dixiecrat states + KY/TN/WV/MD/MO/OK Border States + IL/IA (no IA went Dewey) + OH + WI + MN + most of Mountain West (CO, NM, MT, WY, ID, UT, NV - some went Dewey actually) + CA + WA + MA + RI. Dewey states (16): Most Northeast except MA, RI; rural Midwest IN, MI; IA, NE; ME, NH, VT; NY, NJ, PA, DE, CT. Thurmond states (4): AL, LA, MS, SC + 1 EV TN. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Truman held most of Solid South despite civil rights plank. (2) Dewey strong in Northeast except big-city machines (NYC went Dewey state of NY). (3) Truman won crucial Midwest (Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin) by mobilizing labor + farmer voters. (4) Dixiecrat 39 EV demonstrated Deep South's structural sensitivity to civil rights. (5) Wallace got 0 EV - left-wing third-party failure structurally typical.

AP students should be able to articulate the pattern.