1948

Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

A 75-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 + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1948: Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1948 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1948 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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 Truman's 303-189-39 EV victory over Dewey and Thurmond - biggest upset in U.S. presidential history. Truman had succeeded FDR April 12, 1945. Authorized August 1945 atomic bombings. Articulated Truman Doctrine March 1947. Signed Marshall Plan April 1948. Recognized Israel May 14, 1948. Begun June 1948 Berlin Airlift. Domestic conditions turbulent. 1945-46 reconversion produced labor strikes (~5M workers). November 1946 midterm: Republicans gained 55 House + 12 Senate seats - first Republican Congress since 1932. Taft-Hartley Act June 1947 (over Truman veto) limited union power. Democratic Party split three ways: (1) Truman moderates. (2) Henry Wallace Progressive Party (left). (3) Strom Thurmond Dixiecrats (right) - bolted from July 12-15, 1948 Democratic Convention after civil rights plank adopted. Humphrey's July 14 speech: "walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights." Mississippi and Alabama delegations walked out. Republican National Convention Philadelphia June 21-25, 1948 renominated Dewey on third ballot over Taft and Stassen. Earl Warren (CA Governor) VP. Democratic National Convention Philadelphia July 12-15, 1948 renominated Truman by acclamation. Sen Alben Barkley (KY) VP. Truman's strategy: attack Republican Congress. "Turnip Day Session" July 26, 1948. EO 9981 same day desegregated armed forces.

Whistle-stop tour 31,000 miles, 271 speeches from Ferdinand Magellan train. "Give 'em hell, Harry!" "It's a do-nothing, good-for-nothing Republican 80th Congress."

Dewey's campaign error: treated campaign as won; bland speeches; refused to attack Truman.

Election Night November 2, 1948. Chicago Tribune "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline printed 8 PM before all votes counted. By 4 AM EST November 3 Truman won. Truman awakened 4:30 AM.

Truman 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%). Truman-Dewey margin: 2,188,055.

November 4, 1948 St. Louis Union Station photo of Truman holding wrong-headline Tribune became iconic.

Truman inaugurated January 20, 1949. "Point Four" - U.S. technical and economic aid to developing countries.

1948 election structural significance: (1) Confirmed Truman as Cold War leader. (2) Dixiecrat revolt foreshadowed 1960s civil rights realignment. (3) Polling failure produced methodology reforms. (4) Truman's upset established underdog campaign model.

Truman 1949-53: Korean War 1950-53; firing of MacArthur April 1951; McCarthyism rise; NSC-68; 1952 hydrogen bomb. Truman declined 1952; approval fell to 22% by January 1952.

1948 polling failure produced structural methodology reforms. Gallup, Roper had used "quota sampling" - structurally biased toward Republican voters. After 1948: probability sampling with random selection; random-digit dialing (1960s); stratification. 1948 polling failure structurally similar to 1936 Literary Digest failure.

Trumann's 1949-53 presidency would face structural challenges: (1) Korean War (June 25, 1950 - July 27, 1953). North Korean invasion of South Korea triggered U.S. intervention under UN auspices. 33,651 American military deaths. (2) MacArthur firing (April 11, 1951). General Douglas MacArthur (UN forces commander in Korea) had publicly criticized Truman's limited-war policy. Truman fired MacArthur for insubordination - politically damaging despite constitutional propriety. (3) McCarthyism. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin's February 9, 1950 Wheeling West Virginia speech claiming "I have here in my hand a list of 205... members of the Communist Party" who worked at the State Department launched the anti-Communist demagoguery era. (4) NSC-68 (April 1950). Internal Cold War strategy document calling

		for massive U.S. military buildup. Approved by Truman September 1950. Quadrupled U.S. military spending. (5) Hydrogen bomb test (November 1, 1952 - Ivy Mike test on Enewetak Atoll). Soviet hydrogen bomb test followed August 1953. Nuclear arms race accelerated. The 1948 election can be analyzed retrospectively as the structural transition between the FDR-era New Deal Democratic dominance (1932-44) and the post-FDR Truman-era Democratic coalition (1945-52) and beyond. The Truman coalition retained the New Deal urban-industrial-labor base but added the Cold War internationalist commitment that would shape post-WWII U.S. politics. The Dixiecrat revolt signaled the early erosion of the Solid South. The Wallace Progressive Party signaled the early erosion of the left-wing intellectual coalition. Both fractures would deepen over the following two decades. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1948 election tells you about the New Deal Coalition era that the textbook didn't?"

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.

Dixiecrats
1948 segregationist Southern Democratic third party. 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.

Berlin Airlift
June 24, 1948 - May 12, 1949 U.S./British operation supplying West Berlin by air after Soviet ground blockade.

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

"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.

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. The speech was Truman's structural attack on the "do-nothing 80th Congress" - the campaign theme he would carry through his whistle-stop tour.

> *"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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the 1948 polling failure produced structural reforms in U.S. polling methodology.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

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 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 symbol of polling failure and unexpected political upsets.

AP students should be able to articulate the headline.

QUESTION 4

Truman's "worst Congress - except one" articulates aggressive attack rhetoric. Rhetorical strategy: (1) Reduce Truman's political risk by attacking Congress rather than defending his record. (2) Force Republican defensive responses about why 80th Congress had failed to act. (3) Mobilize Democratic base voters concerned about Republican obstruction. (4) Use humor to make attacks memorable. (5) Frame Republican inaction as moral failure. 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. (2) 1948 trigger was federal civil rights: Humphrey's speech + Truman's EO 9981. (3) Geographic pattern consistent with later realignment: 4 Deep South states (AL, LA, MS, SC). (4) Thurmond switched to Republican 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.

AP students should be able to articulate the realignment.

QUESTION 6

The 1948 polling failure produced structural reforms in U.S. polling methodology. 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 and more likely to cooperate). Polls predicted Dewey landslide; actual result was Truman 49.6% vs Dewey 45.1%. 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. (4) Continuous polling rather than stopping in September (Roper had stopped polling in September 1948 because Dewey lead seemed insurmountable). 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. The lesson: polling methodology must adjust as the underlying population and communication technology change.

AP students should be able to articulate the methodology reforms.

QUESTION 7

Truman states (28): rest of Solid South (TX, FL, GA, NC, VA, AR + Border States KY, TN, WV, MD, MO, OK) + Midwest (OH, IL, WI, MN, IA - wait IA went Dewey actually) + Mountain West states + CA + WA + MA + RI. Dewey states (16): Northeast except MA, RI (NY, NJ, PA, CT, DE, NH, VT, ME) + rural Midwest IN, MI + IA, NE, KS, ND, SD, WY (some), OR. Thurmond states (4): AL, LA, MS, SC. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Truman held most of Solid South despite civil rights plank. (2) Dewey strong in Northeast except big-city machines. (3) Truman won crucial Midwest (Ohio, Illinois, Wisconsin) through labor + farmer mobilization. (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.

Discussion prompts

1. Truman's 1948 victory was biggest upset in U.S. presidential history. Identify three structural reasons polls and political analysts had been so confident Dewey would win.

2. The 1948 Dixiecrat revolt was first major Southern Democratic break with national party. Identify three structural reasons the revolt foreshadowed the 1960s civil rights realignment.