AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1948

Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

A 105-minute lesson on the 1948 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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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3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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1948: Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

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. Democratic Party split three ways: Truman moderates; Henry Wallace Progressive Party (left); Strom Thurmond Dixiecrats (right) - bolted from July 12-15, 1948 Democratic Convention after civil rights plank adopted. Republican National Convention Philadelphia June 21-25, 1948 renominated Dewey on third ballot over Taft and Stassen. Earl Warren VP. Democratic Convention renominated Truman + Barkley VP. Truman strategy: attack Republican 80th Congress. "Turnip Day Session" July 26, 1948. EO 9981 same day desegregated armed forces. Whistle-stop tour 31,000 miles, 271 speeches. Dewey campaign error: treated as won; bland speeches; refused to attack Truman. Chicago Tribune "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline November 3, 1948 printed before all votes counted. Truman won by 4 AM EST. Truman 303 EV; Dewey 189; Thurmond 39. Popular vote: Truman 49.6%; Dewey 45.1%; Thurmond 2.4%; Wallace 2.4%. 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.

The 1948 election can be analyzed retrospectively as the structural transition between FDR-era New Deal Democratic dominance (1932-44) and post-FDR Truman-era Democratic coalition (1945-52). Truman coalition retained New Deal urban-industrial-labor base but added Cold War internationalist commitment. Dixiecrat revolt signaled early erosion of Solid South. Wallace Progressive Party signaled early erosion of left-wing intellectual coalition. Both fractures would deepen.

The 1948 polling failure structural analysis: Quota sampling vs probability sampling. Gallup's 1936 prediction of Roosevelt had used probability sampling and been correct - earning Gallup's reputation. By 1948, Gallup's organization had grown and reverted to quota sampling for cost reasons. The Roper Poll stopped polling in September 1948 because Dewey's lead seemed insurmountable - a structural error preventing detection of late-September voter shifts. The cumulative effect: polls missed Truman's late campaign surge through whistle-stop mobilization. After 1948 pollsters shifted to (1) probability sampling, (2) continuous polling through Election Day, (3) random-digit dialing (developed 1960s as telephone penetration increased), (4) stratification by demographic and geographic variables. Modern polling methodology dates from the post-1948 reforms.

The 1948 election's political-philosophical significance: Truman demonstrated that confident expert predictions can be wrong. The 1948 polling failure became a structural reminder of the limits of expert authority. Subsequent comparable failures: 1980 Reagan landslide (polls had predicted close race); 2016 Trump victory (polls predicted Clinton win); 2024 Trump victory (polls predicted close race but Trump significantly outperformed). The 1948 pattern of "expert predictions vs voter behavior" remains structurally relevant to U.S. political analysis.

The 1948 Dixiecrat revolt's long-term structural significance: The revolt was the first major Southern Democratic break with the national party since Reconstruction. The trajectory: 1948 Dixiecrat ’ 1956 Eisenhower carried Southern states FL, KY, LA, TN, TX, VA ’ 1964 Goldwater carried Deep South AL, GA, LA, MS, SC ’ 1968 Wallace carried AL, AR, GA, LA, MS + Nixon carried other Southern states ’ 1972 Nixon carried all Southern states ’ 1976 Carter carried Southern states (Southern Democrat) ’ 1980 Reagan carried all Southern states except GA ’ 1984 Reagan carried all Southern states ’ 1988 Bush carried all Southern states ’ 1992-96 Clinton carried some Southern states (Southern Democrat) ’ 2000-present Republican dominance in Southern states. The 1948 revolt was the structural beginning of this 60-year realignment.

20 min **Source A**

		Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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. 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.

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.

Whistle-stop tour
Truman's 1948 31,000-mile cross-country train tour. 271 speeches.

"Do-nothing Congress"
Truman's 1948 attack on Republican-controlled 80th Congress.

Executive Order 9981
July 26, 1948 Truman order desegregating U.S. armed forces.

Truman Doctrine
March 12, 1947 articulation of Cold War containment policy.

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.

> *"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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Address Before the National Convention of the American Legion

HARRY S. TRUMAN, AUGUST 14, 1948

“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.

SOURCE B

Speech at Democratic National Convention

HUBERT H. HUMPHREY, JULY 14, 1948

“My friends, to those who say that we are rushing this issue of civil rights, I say to them we are 172 years late. To those who say this civil-rights program is an infringement on states' rights, I say this: The time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights. People - human beings - this is the issue of the twentieth century. People of all kinds, all sorts of people, and these people are looking to America for leadership, and they're looking to America for precept and example. My good friends, my fellow Democrats, I ask you for a calm consideration of our historic opportunity.”

Humphrey, "Speech at Democratic National Convention" (Philadelphia, July 14, 1948). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ɗ50 words.

The 1948 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Truman American Legion 1948) articulating the do-nothing Congress attack. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Humphrey 1948 Convention) articulating civil rights commitment. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources are 1948 Democratic political speeches but address different structural challenges. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Humphrey's "172 years late" framing places the 1948 civil rights commitment in long-term historical perspective. What is the rhetorical purpose?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific 1948-1968 developments that operationalized the structural realignment Humphrey's speech inaugurated.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How old was Hubert Humphrey when he delivered the July 14, 1948 civil rights speech?

( ) A. 28
( ) B. 32
( ) C. 37
( ) D. 42

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

In what month and year did Truman issue Executive Order 9981 desegregating armed forces?

( ) A. March 1947
( ) B. June 1948
( ) C. July 1948
( ) D. November 1948

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1948 election about upset-model, Dixiecrat-realignment, or polling-reforms? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Truman's August 1948 American Legion address (Source A) articulated the "do-nothing 80th Congress" attack that defined his 1948 whistle-stop campaign. Humphrey's July 1948 Democratic Convention speech (Source B) articulated the civil rights commitment that produced the Dixiecrat revolt. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1946-1968 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1948 election's structural significance was (a) Truman's upset victory establishing the underdog presidential campaign model, (b) the Dixiecrat revolt foreshadowing the 1960s civil rights realignment, or (c) the polling failure producing methodology reforms that would shape U.S. political analysis. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the upset-model-vs-Dixiecrat-realignment-vs-polling-reforms axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Taft-Hartley Act, Executive Order 9981, the Korean War, Strom Thurmond's 1964 Republican switch, the Wallace Progressive campaign, the 1968 Wallace Independent campaign. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "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 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". The "worst Congress - except one" phrase is the most distinctive Truman formulation.

Truman's framing established the do-nothing Congress attack.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "The time has arrived in America for the Democratic Party to get out of the shadow of states' rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights", "we are 172 years late", "People - human beings - this is the issue of the twentieth century". The "sunshine of human rights" phrase is the most distinctive civil rights formulation.

Humphrey's framing established the civil rights commitment.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Truman's August 1948 campaign attack speech - articulated 11 weeks before Election Day to define his "do-nothing Congress" framework. The function is to attack the Republican Congress and create defensive Republican responses; structurally turning Truman's political weakness (incumbent against hostile Congress) into political strength. Source B is Humphrey's July 1948 Democratic Convention floor speech - articulated to mobilize delegate support for a strong civil rights plank. The function is to force the Democratic Party to choose between its Southern segregationist wing and its Northern civil rights wing. Together the sources reveal the structural tensions of 1948 Democratic politics: Truman's campaign was attacking Republicans while the Democratic Party was breaking internally over civil rights. The combined effect: Truman won the 1948 election while losing the Solid South (4 Deep South states to Thurmond) - foreshadowing the longer 1948-1972 civil rights realignment.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural tensions.

QUESTION 4

Humphrey's "172 years late" framing places the 1948 civil rights commitment in long-term historical perspective: 172 years from the 1776 Declaration of Independence ("all men are created equal"). The rhetorical purpose: (1) Counter the "rushing this issue" criticism - civil rights was not premature; it was structurally overdue. (2) Establish moral high ground - the Declaration's "all men are created equal" had been operationally violated for 172 years. (3) Position the Democratic Party as the inheritor of the American constitutional tradition - civil rights as completion of the founding commitment, not departure from it. (4) Reduce the political cost of breaking with Southern Democrats - if civil rights was the structural completion of the Declaration, opponents were structurally on the wrong side of history. The framing was rhetorically effective: it positioned the civil rights commitment as conservative (restoring the original constitutional promise) rather than radical. Subsequent civil rights leaders (King, Johnson) would use similar "completion of founding promise" rhetoric. The structural lesson: progressive policy commitments can be framed as conservative restoration of original constitutional principles.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 5

Three specific 1948-1968 developments that operationalized the structural realignment: (1) July 26, 1948 Executive Order 9981 desegregating U.S. armed forces - signed by Truman 12 days after Humphrey's speech. The first major federal civil rights action since Reconstruction. Operationalized 1948-54. (2) May 17, 1954 Brown v. Board of Education - Supreme Court ruled "separate but equal" public schools unconstitutional. Chief Justice Earl Warren (1948 Republican VP nominee) wrote the unanimous opinion. Began the structural process of public-school desegregation. (3) July 2, 1964 Civil Rights Act of 1964 - signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson (whom Humphrey served as VP 1965-69). Prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and federally funded programs. Title VII created EEOC. Operationally completed federal civil rights commitment Humphrey had articulated in 1948. (4) August 6, 1965 Voting Rights Act of 1965 - eliminated literacy tests and other voting restrictions; established federal supervision of voter registration in states with histories of discrimination. (5) April 11, 1968 Civil Rights Act of 1968 (Fair Housing Act) - prohibited racial discrimination in housing. Signed days after MLK's April 4, 1968 assassination. Additional developments: 1955-56 Montgomery Bus Boycott; 1957 Little Rock crisis (Eisenhower sent federal troops); 1960-65 sit-ins, Freedom Rides, March on Washington (August 1963 MLK "I Have a Dream"); 1965 Selma marches. The cumulative effect: by 1968, the federal civil rights commitment Humphrey had articulated in 1948 had been substantially operationalized through legislation, court decisions, and executive action.

AP students should be able to articulate multiple operationalizations.

QUESTION 6

37. Humphrey was born May 27, 1911; the July 14, 1948 speech was 47 days after his 37th birthday. He had been mayor of Minneapolis 1945-48 and was a candidate for U.S. Senate from Minnesota (he would win that November). He would later serve as LBJ's VP (1965-69) and as the 1968 Democratic presidential nominee.

AP students should know Humphrey's age.

QUESTION 7

July 1948. Truman signed Executive Order 9981 on July 26, 1948 - the same day he called the 80th Congress back into the "Turnip Day Session." The order established the principle "that there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin." Operationalized 1948-54.

AP students should know the July 1948 date.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the upset-model-vs-Dixiecrat-realignment-vs-polling-reforms axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory.