1948

Harry S. Truman vs Thomas E. Dewey

A 20-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Story (with a picture)
3. Three questions
4. Teacher notes

1948

Truman had been president since April 1945 when FDR died. He had made hard decisions: dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ending WWII; supported new United Nations; faced Soviet Union expanding in Eastern Europe; signed Truman Doctrine 1947 to contain Communism; signed Marshall Plan April 1948 to rebuild Europe.

But Truman was unpopular in 1948. The post-war economy had labor strikes. Republicans had won big in 1946 midterm elections - first Republican Congress since 1932. Truman vetoed Taft-Hartley Act 1947 (which limited unions) but Congress overrode his veto. Truman was a plain-spoken Missouri farmer who seemed small compared to FDR.

Democratic Party was split THREE ways in 1948. Truman moderate Democrats in middle. Henry Wallace Progressive Party on left (wanted accommodation with Soviet Union). Strom Thurmond Dixiecrats on right (Southern segregationists - bolted convention when Democrats added civil rights to platform). Three-way split looked fatal.

Look at picture. That Harry Truman - the man who pulled off biggest upset in U.S. history.

Republicans renominated Thomas Dewey. Confident, organized.



Harry S. Truman, the 33rd U.S. president. He pulled off the biggest upset in U.S. presidential history in 1948.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS - U.S. FEDERAL GOVERNMENT WORK, PUBLIC DOMAIN

Let's talk about the story

1.

What was the famous newspaper headline that was wrong about the 1948 election?

2.

Who were the Dixiecrats?

3.

What was Truman's whistle-stop tour?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1948 newspapers and pollsters were SURE Republican Tom Dewey would defeat Harry Truman. Chicago Tribune even printed "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline before all votes counted. But Truman pulled off biggest upset in U.S. history!

Answer key

1.

"Dewey Defeats Truman" - Chicago Tribune front-page headline November 3, 1948. The Tribune's early edition was printed before all votes counted, based on polls predicting Dewey landslide. By morning Truman had won. Truman famously held up the wrong-headline newspaper for photographers at St. Louis Union Station November 4, 1948. The photo became iconic - a symbol of polling failure and unexpected political upsets.

AP students should know the Tribune headline.

2.

The Dixiecrats (officially the States' Rights Democratic Party) was the 1948 segregationist Southern Democratic third party. They bolted from the 1948 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia July 12-15 after the convention 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"). Strom Thurmond (Governor of South Carolina) led the walkout. The Dixiecrats nominated Thurmond for president. The party's platform: defense of "racial integrity" and opposition to federal civil rights legislation. Won 39 EV in 4 Deep South states (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina) plus 1 EV from Tennessee + 2.4% popular vote nationally. The 1948 Dixiecrat revolt was the first major Southern Democratic break with the national party - foreshadowing the 1960s civil rights realignment that would move the Solid South from Democratic to Republican.

AP students should know the Dixiecrats.

3.

Truman's whistle-stop tour was his 1948 31,000-mile cross-country train tour. He gave 271 speeches from the rear platform of his train car (the Ferdinand Magellan). The tour began Labor Day September 6, 1948. The "whistle-stop" name came from Republican Senator Robert Taft's September dismissal of Truman: "Truman is blackguarding Congress at every whistle stop in the West." (A whistle-stop is a small town where trains stop briefly only when signaled.) Truman adopted the term as his campaign brand and made the whistle-stop tour the structural foundation of his 1948 campaign. The tour was politically effective: Truman addressed millions of voters directly, attacked the "do-nothing Republican Congress," and demonstrated his plain-spoken political appeal. Without the whistle-stop tour and Truman's aggressive campaigning, he likely would have lost. The tour became a model for subsequent presidential campaigns and a symbol of "old-fashioned" retail politics.

AP students should be able to articulate the whistle-stop tour.