

# HARRY TRUMAN AND THE ELECTION OF 1948

On the night of Election Day in 1948, presidential rivals President Harry S. Truman and New York Governor Thomas Dewey awaited the election results. Fractures within Truman's own Democratic Party and months of polls predicting Truman's defeat left many to presume he would lose the race. The *Chicago Tribune* newspaper was so confident of Dewey's victory that it printed the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" in anticipation of the next morning's news. Why did Truman seem to be on the brink of defeat?

Harry Truman was vice president to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). When FDR died on April 12, 1945, Truman assumed the presidency. World War II soon concluded in Europe, and with Truman's fateful decision to drop two atomic bombs on Japan, the war concluded in the Pacific in September.

With the end of the war, Truman faced the daunting challenge of stewarding the U.S. from a wartime to a peacetime economy. Over 12 million men in the armed services were returning home and would be looking for jobs. Many would take advantage of low-interest college or small-business loans under the G.I. Bill, passed in 1944.

In an effort to usher in the peacetime economy, Truman aimed to reinvigorate FDR's New Deal policies, a sweeping series of government programs, like Social Security, to counteract the Great Depression. Truman pushed for additional reforms: a minimum-wage increase, public housing, aid to public schools, and a national health insurance program.

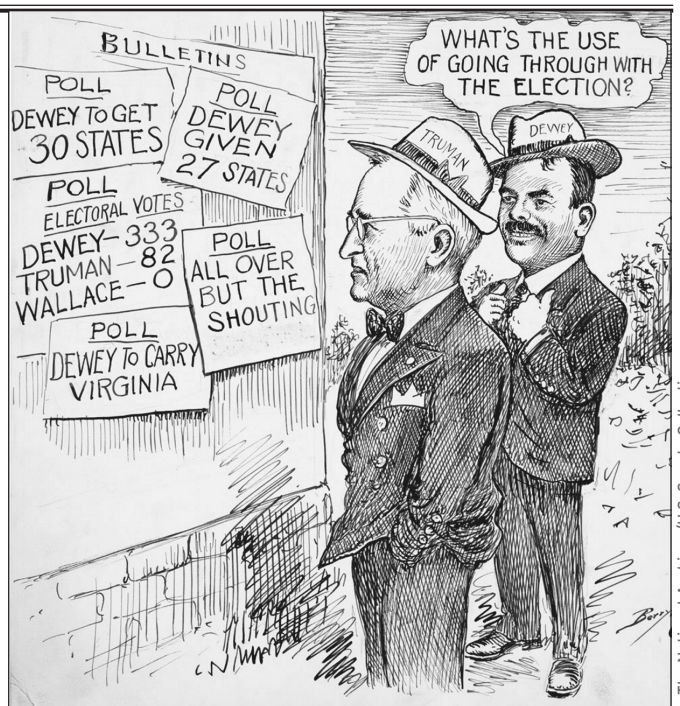
Many of Truman's opponents, notably Republicans in Congress, dismissed him as an "accidental president." But he faced tough opposition even within his own party. Leading up to the 1948 election, he faced major political challenges in three major areas: labor, civil rights, and the Cold War.

## Labor Issues

During World War II, labor union membership had doubled. Many unions had also signed no-strike pledges in order to maintain production of weapons, ammunition, and supplies for the war effort. Disputes workers had with employers had to be put on hold.

Between 1945 and 1946, after the war had ended, those disputes boiled over into a "strike wave" during which there were over 4,900 strikes across the country involving 4.6 million workers. Many people were angry because the strikes interrupted business, and Republicans alleged that Communists infiltrated, or secretly joined, the unions to undermine American business.

The strike wave had political consequences. In the 1946 mid-term elections, Republicans took control of Congress for the first time since 1930. (It was the country's 80th Congress.) Truman's approval ratings plummeted—from 82 percent in January 1946 to 35 percent a year



This political cartoon was published on October 19, 1948. What does the timing of the cartoon and its content tell you about public opinion at the time?

later. Over Truman's veto, Congress passed the Taft-Hartley bill in 1947, which restricted the ability of labor unions to organize and strike.

## Civil Rights Issues

Truman was greatly concerned about civil rights for black people in the South. State laws stretching back decades had made racial segregation legal. Between 1877 and 1950, nearly 4,000 black people were victims of lynchings in Southern states. Congress had been unable to pass an anti-lynching law in the 1920s.

These realities and the lack of opportunities for African Americans in the South caused a mass migration. Starting in about 1910, and for the next few decades, 1.5 million African Americans migrated out of the South, particularly during the war.

Truman appointed a committee on civil rights that issued a report in October 1947 recommending a federal anti-lynching law and other measures to protect black citizens. He delivered his legislative recommendations to Congress in February 1948.

Truman's proposals caused a roar of outrage in the South. His fellow Democrats in the South began to oppose him. Democratic Senator James Eastland of Mississippi said, "Both races recognize that the society of the South is built upon segregation." Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, also a Democrat, denounced Truman's recommendations.

In March, a committee of six Democratic governors and Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia met in Washington. They issued a report that they would "fight to the last ditch" against the nomination of Harry Truman for president in the 1948 presidential election.



## Nominating the Candidates

In the summer of 1948, the parties held conventions to nominate their candidates. First was the Republican convention in June in Philadelphia. Thomas E. Dewey, the moderate governor of New York, was the front-runner. A successful New York prosecutor in the 1930s, Dewey later became governor, enacting the first state law prohibiting racial discrimination in employment. He was the party's nominee in 1944 but lost the election to FDR.

Dewey was also immensely popular. Because he mildly supported the New Deal, however, and also stood behind the Truman Doctrine and the Berlin Airlift, the conservative wing of the Republican Party disliked him. But Dewey won the nomination and chose another popular governor, Earl Warren of California, as his running mate. Republicans expected him to easily beat Truman, who had low popularity in the polls.

In July, the Democrats held their convention, also in Philadelphia. Truman was willing to accept a general proposal for civil rights in the party's platform (statement of principles). But many other liberal Democrats wanted the platform to include Truman's own specific proposals from earlier that year. By the last day of the convention, the party adopted the specific proposals, which included an anti-lynching law and creation of a fair employment committee.

The platform appealed to liberals and the party's core African American constituency. But it angered white Southerners, another core constituency. The Mississippi delegation and half of the Alabama delegation walked out of the convention. The remaining Southern delegates supported a protest candidate from Georgia. A major fracture had opened within the Democratic Party.

## Third Party Challenges

The walkout Southern delegates decided to nominate a candidate for a new States' Rights Democratic Party (aka Dixiecrats) in Birmingham, Alabama, which opposed the federal government imposing civil rights laws on the Southern states. On July 17, just a few days after the Democratic convention, the crowd at this new party convention waved Confederate flags and chanted "To hell with Truman!"

The delegates endorsed segregation and rejected the federal government's power to legislate race relations. They then nominated Strom Thurmond as their presidential candidate. Many predicted that Thurmond's Dixiecrats, and not the Democrats, would win in Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Arkansas. Without internal political pressure from Southern Democrats, however, Truman was able to issue an executive order desegregating the military on July 26.

## Cold War Issues

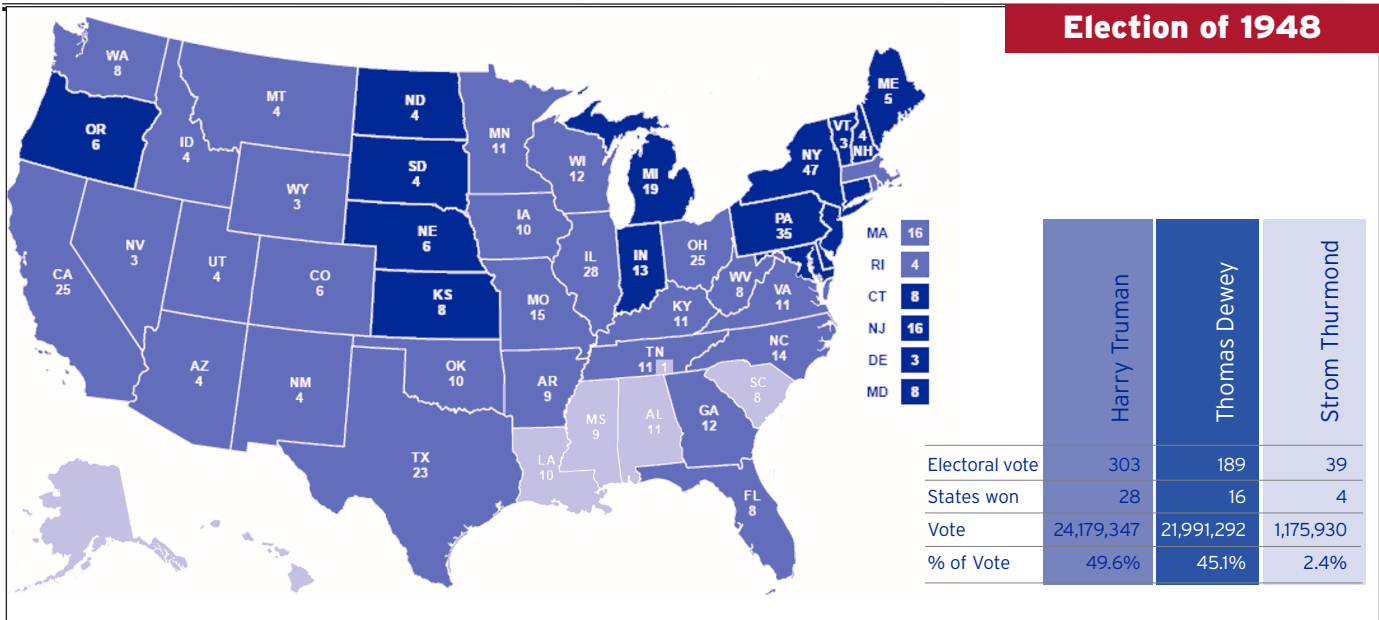
Conflict with the Soviet Union (aka USSR) was a backdrop to Truman's entire presidency. The Soviets had been U.S. allies in World War II, but Soviet leader Joseph Stalin believed that conflict between capitalism in the West and Soviet Communism was inevitable.

The USSR increased its military strength to expand influence in the world, and imposed puppet governments in Eastern Europe to create a buffer between it and Western Europe. The United States under Truman fortified its military strength to contain the expansion, and the Cold War was born. Containment of the Soviets became known as the Truman Doctrine.

In June 1948, the Soviets brazenly blocked all access to the city of West Berlin in Germany, or the part of Berlin under the control of Western democracies: Britain, France, and the United States. Many Republicans in Congress and others called for a military response to the USSR.

Truman believed a military reaction might provoke World War III. Instead, he ordered a massive airlift of supplies to the people in West Berlin. Republicans called Truman "soft" on Communism. Ultimately, the "Berlin Airlift" undermined and defeated the Soviet blockade, but in the meantime, the 1948 election loomed.

## Election of 1948



At the same time as Thurmond's rise, a left-wing challenge to Truman's election came from Henry Wallace. Wallace had been FDR's vice president from 1941 to 1945. Wallace was very liberal and had a sympathetic view toward Stalin. While vice president, he travelled on a goodwill trip to the USSR and gave gifts to Stalin. He gained a reputation as a "Stalinist stooge."

Even though FDR, too, believed that the U.S. and the USSR could cooperate in world affairs, FDR replaced Wallace with the less controversial Harry Truman in the 1944 election. Truman later appointed Wallace as secretary of commerce. In September 1946, however, Wallace gave a speech severely criticizing Truman's hard-line policies toward the USSR. Truman then forced Wallace to resign from the Cabinet.

In December 1947, Wallace declared that he would found a new party and run for president as a left-wing challenger to Truman. On July 23, 1948, thousands gathered in Philadelphia for a new Progressive Party and nominated Wallace as their candidate.

### Following the Polls

The general election campaign began. Henry Wallace had a difficult time for many reasons. In the Deep South (southernmost states) he ate at black school cafeterias and restaurants. He also invited black leaders to stand with him when he spoke publicly. As a result, white racist hecklers would often throw eggs and garbage at Wallace.

Neither was the Progressive Party's position on the USSR popular. When he spoke about America's failures in the Cold War, hecklers would often shout "Go back to Russia!" or "Give our regards to Stalin!" The party could not make it onto every state's ballot, making voting for Wallace difficult in many areas. Wallace and the Progressive Party also suffered in the polls.

Strom Thurmond spent most of his time campaigning in the South where the States' Rights Party was strongest. He openly criticized both Truman and Dewey, saying either of them would "convert America into a Hitler state," claiming that the federal government was restricting states' rights.

Thurmond's strategy was not to win the election outright. He wanted to win just enough electoral votes to deprive Truman and Dewey of a clear majority. Under the 12th Amendment to the Constitution, the election would then be thrown to the House of Representatives. Each state would have one vote, and Thurmond was confident that Truman could not carry a majority of the states.

Dewey's campaign strategy was to avoid risks and keep his poll numbers up. Therefore, he decided to act "presidential" and stay above the fray. He rarely mentioned Truman's name in his

speeches and did not directly attack the Democrats. He also never laid out a specific plan of what he would do as president.

According to the polls, Dewey's strategy was working. Throughout the summer, three major polling companies all showed Dewey far ahead. In a September article, pollster Elmo Roper wrote that his latest survey showed Dewey with a 44 percent to 31 percent lead over Truman, and that only a "political convulsion" could keep Dewey from the White House.

### 'Give 'Em Hell Harry'

The polls had cast a gloomy mood over the White House. To fight the mood, Truman wrote that he wanted to "go directly to the people." On September 18, he left D.C. on a tour by train through 30 states in 33 days. When he left Washington's Union Station, his vice president, Alben Barkley, called out to him, ▶

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outrage in the South.*

“Mow ‘em down, Harry!” Truman responded, “I’m going to give ‘em hell!”

Truman spoke to crowds from his train’s rear platform in a comfortable, “folksy” manner that people liked. His first stop was in Dexter, Iowa, where he spoke before a crowd of 75,000 who had gathered at the National Plowing Contest. Truman was dressed like any farmer in shirt sleeves, and spoke happily of his past on a farm.

Unlike Dewey, Truman gave feisty speeches that attacked his opponents. The Democratic Party, he said, represents the common people, while the Republican Party represents the rich. Democrats, he said, will work for agriculture, for small businesses, and for the white-collar (professional) workers, too.

Of the Republicans in Congress, Truman said, “They are cunning men . . . they want a return of the Wall Street dictatorship.” His speech concluded, “I’m not asking you to vote for me. Vote for yourselves. Vote for your farms. Get out there on Election Day and vote for your future.”

Truman loved being out among the people, and the people loved seeing him. In Waco, Texas, Truman shook the hand of a black woman and was booed by a white heckler. Truman was undaunted. Wherever his train stopped, crowds of people rushed up to the tracks yelling “Give ‘em hell, Harry!”

Political opinion writers in major newspapers and magazines were not impressed with these shows of support for Truman, but polls were starting to hint that his popularity was growing. A Gallup poll just before Election Day showed Dewey’s lead dropping from 17 percent in late September to nine percent in October and to just five percent at the end of the month.

### Against the Odds

Election Day was November 2, 1948. Truman spent the night in Excelsior Springs, Missouri (his home state). Truman had carried Southern states (except for the three that went to the Dixiecrats) and was doing well in the North and the Midwest. By 9:00 p.m., there was no clear winner, and Truman went to bed.

At midnight, Truman awoke to hear on the radio that Dewey was 1,200,000 votes behind. The NBC radio announcer still claimed Truman was “undoubtedly beaten.” By morning, however, Truman had won over 24 million votes compared to Dewey’s nearly 22 million votes. Truman had 303 electoral votes, and Dewey had only 189. Thurmond won 39 electoral votes, and Wallace won none.

Moreover, Truman’s relentless campaign-trail criticism of the Republicans helped the Democrats regain control of both houses of Congress. Because of the

media’s widespread expectations that Truman would lose, Truman’s landslide victory and the congressional “flip” were a tremendous upset for the Republicans.

Truman used his revitalized political support to his advantage. In his State of the Union speech to Congress on January 5, 1949, he called for the federal government “to help raise the standard of living of our citizens . . . in the fields of social security, health, education, housing, and civil rights.”

“Every segment of our population and every individual has a right to expect from our government a fair deal,” he told Congress. His reform program then became known as the Fair Deal, a way to extend the success of FDR’s New Deal, and one of the major legacies of the election of 1948.

## DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Use evidence from the article to compare the campaigns of Dewey and Truman.
2. What do you think Truman meant when he told supporters, “Vote for yourselves”? Use evidence from the article to explain your answer.
3. Why do you think Henry Wallace won no electoral votes? Use evidence from the article to explain your answer.
4. Domestic policy refers to the policies of the government on issues within the nation, such as labor, education, and agriculture. In what ways did the Cold War influence Truman’s domestic policy decisions?

### ACTIVITY: Tough Talk

President Truman feared the strike wave of 1946 would severely disrupt the economy. In fact, when railroad workers struck in May, Truman was so angry he planned to draft the striking workers into the armed forces. He wrote a speech to be delivered over the radio, but he never delivered it. Here is an excerpt:

*Let us give the country back to the people. Let’s put transportation and production back to work, hang a few traitors, make our country safe for democracy, tell the Russians where to get off and make the United Nations work. Come on boys, let’s do the job.*

In small groups, discuss your answers to the following questions:

1. How would you describe Harry Truman’s personality and use of language in the article?
2. How does the language of the excerpt above compare with your description of him?
3. Why do you think he never delivered the speech? Report to the class your group’s answers to the above questions.

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