

Harry S. Truman: Campaigns and Elections

The Campaign and Election of 1948:

The Democratic Party's poor showing in the 1946 mid-term congressional elections—in which the Republican Party took control of both the Senate and the House of Representatives for the first time since 1928—considerably dimmed Truman's prospects for re-election in 1948. Indeed, a public opinion poll taken in December 1946 revealed that only 35 percent of those surveyed supported his handling of the presidency.

Beginning in 1947, Truman worked assiduously to build support for his candidacy among key segments of the Democratic Party. He repaired his relationship with labor by vetoing the Taft-Hartley bill, courted black Americans by coming out in favor of civil rights, and continued to embrace programs (like national health insurance, a higher minimum wage, and a federal housing measure) dear to party liberals. Truman's anti-Soviet foreign policy won him support among Americans with roots in Eastern Europe and among anti-communist liberals. His decision in May 1948 to recognize the new state of Israel further solidified his relationship with American Jews. Just as important, by 1948, Truman had begun to employ a more relaxed, folksy, and sometimes fiery speaking technique. He combined both style and substance in launching effective attacks against the Republicans. Midway through 1948, however, Truman's popularity among American voters still languished.

Truman and the Democrats

Divisions within the Democratic Party hurt Truman's chances for re-election in 1948. Truman's weakness as a candidate led some Democrats to consider offering the party's nomination to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, whom they (incorrectly) believed to be a Democrat. On the eve of the Democratic convention, Eisenhower strongly denied any interest in the nomination, much to Truman's relief.

Two other challenges would prove more troubling to Truman's candidacy. In January 1948, Truman's former secretary of commerce (and vice president during Roosevelt's third term), Henry Wallace, announced his intention to run for President as a member of the Progressive Party. In September 1946, Secretary Wallace had delivered a speech critical of the

administration's increasingly hard-line foreign policy towards the Soviet Union. Truman asked for Wallace's resignation, which he received. As a third-party candidate, Wallace, who for many years had been darling of the left-wing of the Democratic Party, threatened to rob Truman of the progressive vote.

Truman also faced the prospect of losing the votes of the conservative, southern wing of the Democratic Party, which threatened to bolt over the President's public embrace of African-American civil rights. He hoped he could keep southerners in the Party by making his support for civil rights more rhetorical than substantive, a strategy similar to that employed by President Roosevelt. At the Democratic National Convention in July 1948, however, Truman's approach collapsed after pro-civil rights Democrats—led by Minnesota's Hubert Humphrey and anti-communist liberals from the organization Americans for Democratic Action (ADA)—won a strong civil rights plank for the party's platform.

Truman was willing to accept the plank, holding out hope that southerners would stay in the party. He was wrong; the entire Mississippi delegation and half of the Alabama delegation walked out of the convention. The southerners that remained did so only to vote against Truman's nomination. By the end of July, southern Democrats had formed the States Rights' Party (also known as the Dixiecrats). It nominated Governor J. Strom Thurmond (SC) and Governor Fielding Wright (MS) for President and vice president.

Truman easily won the nomination at the Democratic National Convention in July, choosing liberal Kentucky senator Alben Barkley—after Supreme Court justice William O. Douglas turned down the vice presidential slot—as his running mate. In a fiery speech accepting the nomination, Truman declared "Senator Barkley and I will win this election and make these Republicans like it—don't you forget that!" Truman then played his trump card: he announced his plan to call the Republican-led Congress back into session to pass his legislative program—an invitation to refute charges that it was a "do-nothing" Congress. Of course, Truman did not expect the Republicans to pass his program, nor should they have done so. But Truman's challenge did energize his fellow Democrats, putting the Republicans on the defensive and highlighting Truman's campaign strategy—to run against the Republican Congress.

The Republican Opposition

The Republicans in 1948 nominated New York governor Thomas Dewey for President and California governor Earl Warren for vice president. It was a strong ticket. Dewey had run in 1944 against FDR and lost a close race; he remained young, popular, and progressive. Strongly anti-communist, he was an internationalist in foreign affairs. On domestic issues, Dewey was a moderate critic of the New Deal, which he disliked more for its means than its ends. His main drawback was an aloof, icy, and bland personality; Alice Roosevelt Longworth described him as the "little man on the wedding cake." In spite of this defect, Republicans looked forward to the 1948 campaign, pointing to the GOP's victories in 1946 and Dewey's solid record.

Truman versus Dewey

Truman brought the Republican-controlled 80th Congress back to Washington in late July and presented it with his list of desired legislation. Congress met for two weeks, failed to pass any of Truman's proposals, and adjourned. Truman could now point to yet another example of the "do-nothing" Republican Congress and warn the electorate that a Republican presidential victory would bring only further neglect to the issues he believed important. On civil rights, Truman issued executive orders desegregating the military and ending discrimination in the civil service. No longer beholden to southern Democrats (who supported Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrat candidacy), Truman could finally issue these long-promised initiatives that doubtlessly pleased blacks and liberals, two important segments of the Democratic Party.

Truman began the presidential campaign in earnest with a Labor Day speech to a large union crowd in Detroit. He stumped energetically throughout the fall, making several train tours across the country. These trips allowed him to take his case for re-election to voters in what leading Republican Senator Robert Taft had earlier derided as "whistle stop" speeches delivered from the rear of the presidential train. The longest trip was fifteen days, covered 8,300 miles, and took Truman from Pennsylvania to California.

Truman's "whistle-stops" were a combination of great politics and great theatre. He shook hands with voters, signed autographs, and made wise-cracks about his opponents. With some exaggeration and much fervor, he attacked the Republican Congress, warned that a Republican White House would repeal the New Deal, and reminded voters that the Democrats had saved the country from the depression. Truman also tailored his message to his audience; farmers in Iowa, for example, heard the President claim, "This Republican Congress has already stuck a pitchfork

in the farmer's back." Dewey embarked on several train trips of his own, speaking to large crowds. Unlike Truman, however, he campaigned much more cautiously. For starters, the polls indicated that he held a comfortable lead over Truman. Moreover, Dewey believed that his earlier run for the presidency, against Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944, had suffered from his combative style and attacks on the incumbent. He resolved in 1948, then, to speak mostly in generalities and to refrain from using invective. While he appeared "presidential" during the campaign, Dewey's bland campaign speeches only reinforced his milquetoast image among much of the electorate. Nonetheless, the final pre-election Gallup poll—taken in mid-October—became public the day before the election itself, giving Dewey a solid lead of 49.5 percent to Truman's 44.5 percent of the total vote.

The Election of 1948

On election day, November 2, Truman, along with Bess and Margaret, voted in their hometown of Independence, Missouri. Truman had lunch with several old friends and repaired alone to a local hotel to await the returns. At midnight, Truman heard NBC report that while he was ahead by more than one million votes, Dewey was still expected to win. At four in the morning, his secret service agents woke him and told him to turn on the radio: he was ahead by two million votes—and would maintain the lead. With victory in hand, Truman went to Kansas City, where he awaited Dewey's concession, which came by mid-morning. Two days after the election, as the Trumans returned to Washington via St. Louis, reporters snapped the most famous photo of Truman's career: an image of the President holding aloft a copy of the Chicago Tribune with the headline "Dewey Defeats Truman." Truman had confounded the pundits. He won 49.5 percent of the vote to Dewey's 45.1 percent; 303 electoral college votes to 189 for Dewey. Thurmond and Wallace trailed miserably, each with 2.4 percent of the vote, although Thurmond took four southern states and their 39 electoral votes. Truman's victory came about because he won the support of most of Roosevelt's "New Deal" coalition: labor, Blacks, Jews, farmers from the midwest, and a number of southern states. Truman's victory, however, was far from overwhelming. He barely won California, Illinois, and Ohio, and lost the Democratic strongholds Pennsylvania, New York, Michigan, and New Jersey. In fact, more Americans voted for other candidates than voted for him—far from the popular mandate Truman would have liked.

Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. "Harry S. Truman: Campaigns and Elections." Accessed June 16, 2016. <http://millercenter.org-/president/biography/truman-campaigns-and-elections>.