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Why There Is No President Dewey

In September 1948, both the Roper and Gallup polls showed Harry Truman trailing his Republican opponent, Thomas Dewey, by double digits. So certain of his prediction of a Dewey victory, Roper even suspended polling. In a Newsweek poll, fifty prominent political writers all picked Dewey. Bookies quoted odds on a Truman victory from 15 to 30:1. In October, The New York Times wrote that Dewey's election was a "foregone conclusion." Kiplinger proclaimed, "Dewey will be in for eight years," and produced a thirty-four-page spread titled: "What Dewey Will Do." Life carried a picture of Dewey with the caption, "The Next President of the United States." Sixty-five percent of America's newspapers serving 78% of American readers endorsed Dewey. As late as October 30th, the Republican campaign manager, Herbert Brownwell, predicted a 4-1 margin of victory in the electoral college.

The Chicago Daily Tribune's premature election night headline, "Dewey Defeats Truman," is one of the iconic images of American politics and has served to reinforce in our collective memory the myth that Truman's victory

was the greatest upset in American political history, won by a scrappy, plain speaking, underdog who proved the entire conventional wisdom of the pundits and pollsters to be wrong; however, a Dewey victory in 1948 would have been the real upset.

It was easy to view Truman, described by Clare Boothe Luce, as a “gone goose.” After all, he was an inexperienced, accidental president with the shadow of FDR looming over him. Many regarded him as a caretaker, merely marking time before the 1948 election. After only a few months in office, The Nation characterized Truman as a “weak, baffled, angry man.” Progressive Magazine observed, “a curious uneasiness seems to pervade all levels of government. There is a feeling at times that there is no one at the wheel.” Historian James Patterson judged, “he was slow to find his way before 1947, often insecure, and far less decisive than legend has it.”

Truman could not move his agenda through a Congress, dominated by a hostile coalition of obstructionist conservative southern Democrats and Republicans. Rabid New Dealers excoriated him for not pressing Congress hard enough. His appointment of conservatives and deference to southerners rankled them. The final rift came in September 1946, when he fired the liberal darling, Commerce Secretary Henry Wallace. Subsequently, he failed to

convince the far left, which he once called a “lunatic fringe,” that he was truly committed to the liberal agenda.

On the whole, Americans were disenchanted with the slow pace of war demobilization and reconversion. Labor strikes fueled a popular backlash against unions and the Democrat party. Inflation, inadequate affordable housing, and consumer shortages left many to question Truman’s ability to handle the post war economy. Internationally, the rapid deterioration of Soviet-American relations and the administration’s inability to prevent communist gains in China and eastern Europe eroded his popularity. Jokes like these reflected the popular mood: “Would you like a Truman beer? You know, the one with no head”; or, “Why was the President late to his press conference? He got up this morning a little stiff in the joints and had trouble putting his foot in his mouth”; and the jibe, “To err is Truman.” By October 1946, just ahead of the mid-term elections, polls showed Truman’s job approval at 40%.

Republicans gleefully unleashed their 1946 mid-term campaign slogan, “Had Enough?” In what appeared to be a clear repudiation of the president, they swept the 1946 elections, taking control of both houses of Congress. No party had ever won the mid-term and failed to win the presidency two years later. Emboldened, the new Republican majority chipped away at New Deal

programs, obstructed the president's legislative agenda, and bided their time until 1948.

Ironically, the Republican triumph freed him from the shadow of FDR. He could now be his own man. Press spokesman, Charlie Ross, told reporters, "the real Truman administration began the day after the elections." Truman wrote his wife, "I'm doing as I damn please for the next two years and to hell with all of them."

Precisely when Truman decided to seek re-election is unclear, but he had to have been influenced by Wallace's December 1947 announcement that he was running for president as a third party progressive. Advisor, Clark Clifford, later observed, "The greatest ambition Harry Truman had was to get elected in his own right." Truman remembered, "What I wanted to do personally for my own comfort and benefit was not important. What I could do to contribute to the welfare of the country was important. I had to enter the 1948 campaign."

He used his January 7, 1948, State of the Union Address as a campaign preview. He called for a national health insurance program, a massive housing program, increased government support for education and farmers, a minimum wage hike, a poor man's tax cut, and announced he would send Congress civil rights legislation to include a Federal anti-lynching law,

protection for the right to vote, outlawing the poll tax, and an end to discrimination in employment and public travel. Having already alienated the left wing of the Democrat party, Truman's civil rights agenda pushed the southern right into open revolt. One Congressman asserted that war had been "declared by the chieftain of the Democrat party against the traditions and Caucasianism of the South." Fifty-two Congressional Democrats pledged to fight civil rights legislation. Texas governor, Beaufort H. Jester summarized southern sentiment, labeling Truman's proposals as "anti-Southern . . . [an] aggression upon the sovereignty and civil rights of the [South] from a betrayer of the South."

Polls showed Truman losing to any of four leading Republicans. His approval rating sank to the mid-30's. The media savagely attacked Truman as "colorless," "a little man," "weaker than any president in modern history," with "none of the qualities demanded by the presidency."

Even though not yet nominated, Truman began his campaign on June 3, 1948, with a "non-political" train tour across country to Berkeley where he was to give the commencement address. Over fifteen days he covered 9,500 miles through eighteen states and delivered seventy-three speeches to large crowds, which the press dismissed as natural curiosity to see a president. A pattern emerged in the speeches as he denounced the Republican 80th

Congress which he characterized as “special privilege boys” indifferent to the welfare of the people. A fuming Senator Robert Taft added a new word to the American lexicon as he grouched, “our gallivanting president is blackguarding Congress at every whistle-stop in the West.” That condescending slur did not escape the attention of the nation’s whistle-stops.

On June 24, the day Thomas Dewey unanimously received the Republican nomination, Joseph Stalin gave Truman an election boost by cutting off land access to Berlin. Four days later Truman ordered the Berlin Airlift. This action gave him the appearance of strong leadership in a crisis and silenced Republican charges of weakness and indecisiveness in foreign policy toward the USSR.

On July 11, the Democrat nominating convention began. Kentuckian Alben Barkley remembered, “you could cut the gloom with a corn knife. The very air smelled of defeat.” One cabbie quipped, “we got the wrong rigs for this convention. They should have given us hearses.” However, Hubert Humphrey electrified many delegates and alienated others as he successfully argued for a strong civil rights platform. He chided the delegates, “There are those who say we are rushing this issue of civil rights. I say we are 172 years late. There are those who say this issue is an infringement on states’ rights. The time has arrived for the Democrat party to get out of the shadow of states’ rights and

walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.” In his acceptance speech, Truman delivered a bombshell by announcing that he was calling Congress into special session to implement the Republican platform, which was similar to his own proposals that for two years Republicans had stonewalled. For over a hundred years, no president had called back Congress in an election year, and never as a campaign tactic. He had called the Republican’s bluff, keeping the focus on the Congress and at the same time driving a wedge between the moderate and conservative elements of the Republican Party. He left Dewey with the choice of defending the Republican’s inaction and thereby assuming a share of responsibility for its failure, or to distance himself further from conservative Congressional Republicans. It was a brilliant move to exploit the ideological split in the Republican Party and to depict it as the party of no. Predictably, after fifteen days, Congress adjourned with nothing accomplished. A reporter asked Truman if he considered it was a do-nothing session. Truman replied, “I think that’s a good name for the 80th Congress.” Thus the label, “do-nothing” Congress became the theme of his campaign.

On the heels of the Democrat convention, disaffected southern Dixiecrats tapped Strom Thurmond as the southern candidate for president. Asked why he was breaking with the Democrat Party now, when Roosevelt had made

similar promises on civil rights as Truman, he replied, "Truman really means it." The Democrat Party was divided into three pieces.

In September Truman began campaigning in earnest. As he and his running mate, Alben Barkley, posed for photographers on the rear platform of Truman's train, Barkley exhorted, "Mow 'em down Harry." Setting the tone of the campaign, Truman replied, "I'm going to give 'em hell." In just eight weeks, he would cover 30,000 miles through 28 states and the largest 23 cities, giving 356 speeches along the way. Wherever he spoke there were large and friendly crowds and the usual cry of "Give 'em hell, Harry" rang out.

To the stunned amazement of pollsters and pundits, Truman defeated Dewey by more than two million votes (49% of the popular vote to Dewey's 45%) with a decisive electoral margin of 303 to 189. Democrats also regained control of both houses of Congress. Hailed as the greatest upset in American history, the Truman victory should never have been in doubt.

Truman was an incumbent in command of all the advantages of a sitting president. International events, especially the success of the Berlin Airlift, enhanced his image as a strong leader, and polls showed widespread approval of the administration's foreign policy. Dewey took a bipartisan approach to foreign policy, thus exhibiting a me-tooism that neither separated him from Truman, nor made foreign policy an issue.

By 1948, Truman was presiding over a booming economy. Voters seldom dismiss incumbents in good times. Most Americans liked the New Deal programs and many were convinced that the Republican agenda sought to slash government services. As evidence one could point to a cut of 750,000 people from Social Security, failure to increase the minimum wage, the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act, and obstruction of Truman's social agenda, including civil rights, which Republicans claimed to support.

Alienated black voters abandoned the Republican Party. Seventy percent voted Democrat and black support for Truman was crucial in the cities of Ohio, Illinois, and California. Labor, while mild about Harry, nevertheless provided money and grassroots organization. Together the labor and black vote carried the thirteen largest industrial cities. Truman also benefitted from strong local, state, and congressional candidates who provided reverse coat tails.

Farm support for Truman was crucial. Republican cuts in support for soil conservation through direct payment to farmers, cuts in rural electrification funds, the school lunch program, farm loans and crop insurance and failure to act on an international wheat agreement to assure farmers of export outlets convinced many rural voters that Republicans were no friends of farmers. Truman's populist speeches resonated across the farm belt. In a graphic

accusation that “this Republican Congress has already stuck a pitchfork in the farmer’s back,” Truman blamed agri-business lobbyists and speculators’ control of Congressional Republicans for lack of storage, which caused farmers to sell wheat for less than the support price. He warned that Republicans were “ready to let the bottom fall out of our farm prices . . . but the price of bread has come down not one cent . . . I’m not asking you just to vote for me. Vote for yourselves. Vote for your farms!”

Then there was the reality that 57% of the electorate were registered Democrats. Truman could afford some defection. Republicans later blamed the loss on over confident stay-at-home voters, but studies have shown that apathetic Democrat voters made the race closer than it should have been. If Thurmond’s and Wallace’s votes, normally reliably Democrat, were transferred to Truman, he would have won with 55% of the vote, 1 ½% more than FDR in 1944. Certainly, Wallace votes prevented Truman from winning New York, Michigan, and Maryland. Together, defecting Democrats potentially cost him 139 electoral votes.

Finally, it came down to the campaign and the candidates. Truman came across as warm, genial, and unpretentious. He liked people and showed he was one of them. Dewey, devoid of charisma, was stiff and tactless, and came across as smug and arrogant. Common jokes circulated: “You have to get to

know Dewey well to really dislike him” and “Dewey is a self-made man who worships his creator.” One acquaintance noted Dewey was the only person he knew who could strut while sitting. Another said Dewey comes out like a man mounted on casters who had been shoved from behind. Alice Roosevelt Longworth called him “the little man on the wedding cake.”

Truman took the low road. Mudslinging and demagoguery worked. His populist, anti-big business, anti-elite rhetoric resonated with the voters. He waged a campaign based on small themes tailored for specific audiences worked out in short speeches. Dewey’s campaign was bland. Relying on the accuracy of the polls, he was overly confident and did not work hard at campaigning. Whereas Truman made as many as ten appearances a day beginning at 6:00 a.m., Dewey never appeared before 10:00, and averaged less than five appearances a day. In the crucial state of Ohio, Dewey spoke one time. His solemn speeches lacked specifics and were filled with trite platitudes. He deliberately avoided controversy and ignored real issues, insisting the issue of the election was national unity. The Louisville Courier-Journal observed that Dewey’s speeches could be summarized in four sentences: “Agriculture is important. Our rivers are full of fish. You cannot have freedom without liberty. Our future lies ahead.” Dewey never punched back. E. F. Hutton urged the campaign to “take off the kid gloves and start to

slug . . . against a man armed with brass knuckles, well-schooled in the art of eye gouging, biting and kicking, it is poor judgment to defend oneself with a powder puff." E. F. Hutton spoke, but no one listened.

The performance of the vice-president candidates was also important. Campaigning by air, the old attack dog, Alben Barkley, covered 150,000 miles and 36 states, especially the South, which Truman avoided. He held numerous private talks with southern politicians, which kept most in the fold. In the end, southern politicians were unwilling to trade their seniority and influence in Washington for the futile Dixiecrat protest, but Democrat control of the Solid South had ended. Earl Warren's campaign reflected Dewey's. He talked in lofty terms about national unity transcending politics. In Iowa he asserted, that agriculture was not a political issue. One historian judged that he used the word "progressive" as often as Wallace. Truman called him, "a Democrat who is unaware of it."

Roosevelt had revolutionized political allegiances by creating a new Democrat coalition. Truman simply was the beneficiary of its support. Divested of the radical left and right of the Democrat Party, Truman staked out a middle-left position and needed only to hold the core. Historian Gary Donaldson concluded that the Republicans blundered by interpreting the off year 1946 elections as a Republican and conservative mandate, when it was

neither. Their inability to govern over the next two years squandered their political capital with the public and handed Truman a powerful re-election theme. Six decades later, Truman is remembered as a bold campaigner and decisive leader. Ranking polls consistently place him as near-great in seventh place among presidents—ironically, an evaluation he never remotely enjoyed while in office.