

PRIMA FICHE

G U I D E

**THE ELECTION
OF 1948**

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FOREWORD

For pure political excitement, suspense, and rhetorical excess few presidential races in American history can match the 1948 election. As the materials in this collection clearly reveal, both personality clashes and passionate disagreements over fundamental issues sharply divided the candidates and their supporters. So basic were the differences that for one of the rare times in our modern past the two-party system could not contain them.

The two principal minority party movements defined the most vexing concerns, foreign policy, and race relations. Henry Wallace's Progressive party called for radical changes in the entrenched institutional and social patterns of racial discrimination as well as for détente with the Soviet Union. The States' Rights, or Dixiecrat party, under the candidacy of South Carolina Governor J. Strom Thurmond, responded to the perceived threat posed by Progressives and by liberal Democrats who supported President Harry Truman. The Republican candidate, New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey, with few votes at stake in the Solid South, joined Truman and Thurmond in excoriating Wallace's foreign policy initiatives. In fact, the debate over the proper role of the United States in world affairs became so strong that a conciliatory attitude toward the Soviet Union was politically impossible, particularly after Wallace's dismal electoral showing. By the end of the campaign a national anti-Communist crusade was well under way.

The following documents present accurate reflections of the four campaigns, the tones and vitality of which were so very different. The introduction sketches the national context of that election year and the personalities of the chief protagonists. Supplementary materials for analysis and evaluation are found in Chapter VIII.

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INTRODUCTION

Some American presidents remain vivid figures in the public imagination long after the less glamorous realities of their days in the White House are past. Abraham Lincoln and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, one a martyr to accomplishment and the other to hope, still illuminate American life. Perhaps Theodore Roosevelt and George Washington do too. Another inhabitant of the heroic presidency of memory is Harry S Truman, primarily because of his astounding victory in the election of 1948.

The Truman of memory is a bantam rooster, a feisty fighting underdog who refused to accept the desertion of supporters or the vigorous opposition of other Democrats. Urged to resign, told he should not seek election, confronted by a resurgent Republican party that already had captured control of Congress, Truman went directly to the electorate. In two exhausting train tours he crisscrossed the nation, stopping hundreds of times in major cities and at obscure country crossroads. It is from this vision of the fighting president attacking from the back end of a railroad car that the Truman of memory takes shape.

Time and again the diminutive Truman lashed out, usually at Republicans in general and at the "do-nothing" Republican controlled 80th Congress in particular. Truman associated himself with other American underdogs, with workers and farmers and the aspirations of blacks. Drawing his battle in simple terms of fat-cat reaction against the opportunity due the common man, the president obviously touched his massive and ever more enthusiastic audiences.

Steadily the dismal public opinion ratings evaporated as Truman marched toward November and the most astounding victory in American political history. So strong was the impact of the upset that the heroic figure of Truman triumphant has obscured much of the historical complexity of the election.

Truman's reliance on a pieced together New Deal coalition, shrewd advice from Democratic loyalists, his own personal toughness, and a healthy dose of luck postponed Republican capture of the White House. From 1952 to 1976 Republicans controlled the presidency for sixteen of the twenty-four years, and they might well have ousted Truman in 1948 with a different candidate. Had Truman himself selected his Republican opponent, he could not have done much better than to pick Thomas E. Dewey, governor of New York.

Naturally Governor Dewey enjoyed substantial political assets. In the 1930s he had made an enviable reputation as a gang-busting prosecutor in New York City. Elected governor in 1942, Dewey ran for president against Franklin Roosevelt two years later and made a respectable showing by attracting more votes than any other Republican had ever drawn in the four Roosevelt campaigns. Dewey's political muscle again surfaced in 1946 when he was resoundingly reelected New York's governor. In addition, Dewey's political organization ran smoothly, well supported by major business and financial institutions. At the same time, both Dewey's public personality and the contented presumptions of his entourage that the campaign was a mere formality prior to Dewey's inauguration played perfectly into the hands of Harry Truman.

The personality contrast could not have been greater. Dewey, an unprepossessing figure embellished only by a black patch of mustache, appeared stiff and uncomfortable in crowds. His speeches were gatherings of abstractions and familiar statements of intent, and he conveyed little emotional fervor in his campaign. Between 17 September and 1 October, with Truman on his whistle-stop campaign through the Midwest to the coast, down the length of California, through the Southwest to Texas, and north through Oklahoma, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia, Dewey moved slowly to selected cities. Truman visited 119 sites, speaking at each; Dewey made speeches in 17 places. The casual almost smug tenor throughout the Dewey campaign served Truman well. And there were other fortuitous circumstances that did the same.

Liberals within the Democratic party had long advocated the adoption of civil rights legislation that would finally challenge the segregationist strangelhold held on the black South through the power of southern Democrats. Threats from black leaders to return to their traditional Republican allegiance worried some of the president's advisers. Arguing that the South had no place to go outside the party and that the black vote would be crucial in large northern states, men close to the president convinced him to take vigorous steps toward desegregation. This Truman did, outlawing segregation in the armed forces and consistently promising vigorous federal action. The outraged South protested vehemently in the weeks prior to the Democratic National Convention in July. There, after a strong civil rights plank passed in a bruising floor fight, thirty-five Alabama and Mississippi delegates walked out. Remaining southern delegates refused to make Truman's nomination unanimous and left embittered and revengeful.

Since the Republican platform had similar civil rights pledges, the southerners were indeed stranded. However, the resulting States' Rights (or Dixiecrat) ticket, headed by Governor J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina as presidential candidate, remained a purely sectional phenomenon. The Dixiecrat vote was just over 1 million (about 2.4 percent of the total cast), and the capture of thirty-nine electoral votes. It also won, for Harry Truman, crucial support in black communities everywhere.

In a similar situation Truman endeared himself to the important Jewish vote by according immediate recognition to the declaration of independence of the State of Israel on 14 May, despite the known opposition of the State Department. Indeed the Truman Democrats turned most foreign policy crises to their own advantage in the campaign. They reduced Dewey to a "me too" status by using a consistently hard and aggressive line toward the Soviet Union and using militant anticommunism against the political challenge mounted by the American left, with the Progressive party of America headed by Henry A. Wallace.

The Progressives were clearly to the left even of the liberals who supported Truman. In international affairs they advocated detente with the Soviet Union, a relationship based on ever increasing trade and total deescalation of Cold War flash points around the globe. At home, Wallace and the Progressives advocated social programs of a magnitude far greater than the Truman policies.

Much of the attack on the Wallace campaign came from Americans for Democratic Action, a liberal pressure group that operated within the Democratic party. From the ADA perspective, Wallace threatened to attract Democratic liberals to his movement, thus leaving the president with a political

base too narrow to survive the Republican threat and the southern defection. The major tactic used in neutralizing Wallace was redbaiting. As Truman proudly announced to a national radio audience, "I will not accept the support of Henry Wallace and his Communists."

This line, in infinite variety, punctuated the campaign with great effect. Wallace had begun his crusade in December 1947 with high hopes. Within ten months most Americans believed that the Progressives were stooges of the Kremlin, masterminded by the Communist party of the United States. When election day came, Henry Wallace drew fewer votes than did Strom Thurmond.

Neutralization of radicals and reactionaries permitted the Truman forces to operate within a political context that permitted the president to patch together for one more campaign the New Deal coalition. Fragile though the pieces were, Truman managed.

Labor remained loyal, despite early fears of defections to the Progressives. Old-line Democratic party strategists worked with bright and ambitious new faces within the Democratic National Committee to invigorate big city machines. The president won in nearly all of the most densely populated areas. Other supporters from the South and border states worked quietly to win susceptible electoral votes, such as Arkansas (9), Florida (8), Georgia (12), Kentucky (11), Missouri (15), North Carolina (14), Tennessee (11), Texas (23), and Virginia (11). Some Democratic operatives concentrated on the weakness, real and contrived, of Dewey and Wallace. The president personally showed himself across the land as a great campaigner, a man with whom many Americans would willingly identify themselves. Thus the great diverse coalition and the strength of party organization held for one more election and in so doing created the lasting image of a heroic American.

The documents in the collection that follows are intended to provide students with access to four different perspectives. The election year is viewed from the four base camps, each of them quite different from the others.

Although the selection of documents is not comprehensive, the sample is large and diverse enough to provide students with direct insight into the policies and principal actors in the drama. Naturally, as with all selections, the focus varies. The Dewey material is well organized and bureaucratic; the Truman material is much more personalized, and the large number of campaign speeches clearly convey the flavor of the whistle-stopping tours. Similarly, the three southern newspapers reflect high emotion, although of an entirely different nature. The hostility between liberal Democrats of the ADA and the Wallace Progressives provides a separate focus, exploring as it does the radical alternatives advanced by the Progressives and their harsh rejection by the Democrats.

While it is in a major sense true that there is no final word on historical meaning, it is equally true that aspects of our past inform the present. The election of 1948 is certainly worth studying, both for the richness of its flavor and for the questions it posed, responded to, and left unanswered.

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Accounts of the Dewey campaign are scant, scattered through the monographic literature of the period. Similarly lacking is a full study of the Dixiecrat revolt and of its leaders, primarily Strom Thurmond. One good monograph that touches the subject is William D. Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats: Alabama Politics, 1942-1950* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1974).

The literature on Henry A. Wallace and the Progressive movement is impressive, although the interpretations vary widely. See Norman D. Markowitz, *The Rise and Fall of the People's Century: Henry A. Wallace and American Liberalism, 1945-1948*; see also Curtis D. MacDougall, *Gideon's Army*, 3 vols. (1st ed., New York: Marzani and Munsell, 1965). Another view is Karl M. Schmidt, *Henry Wallace: Quixotic Crusade, 1948* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1960).

Chapter I

The Nomination of Harry S Truman

Material in this chapter covers a period between December 1946 and the conclusion of the Democratic National Convention in July 1948. Principal sources for the material are the Papers of Harry S Truman and some of his close advisers from the Harry S Truman Library, Independence, MO; the Papers of Americans for Democratic Action, from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI; and the *Public Papers of the Presidents* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1948).

The central theme of this collection of documents is the enormous tension between the president and the liberal critics within the Democratic party, critics who formed their own pressure group called Americans for Democratic Action. Mistrusting Truman's commitment to liberal goals and thoroughly convinced by the public opinion polls that a Truman candidacy could only produce a Republican president, ADA fought vigorously to replace him with either General Dwight D. Eisenhower or Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. At the same time, the ADA totally rejected the Progressive party movement of Henry A. Wallace and devoted considerable energy to an anti-Wallace campaign aimed at preventing liberal Democrats from deserting the party.

Following different advice, Truman came out fighting against all who would remove him from the White House.

Chapter II

Henry A. Wallace and the Challenge of the Left

Principal sources for the documents in this chapter are three related collections from the University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA: the Papers of Henry A. Wallace, the Papers of C. B. Baldwin, and the Progressive Party Records. Additional material is from the Papers of Americans for Democratic Action and the now defunct New York City daily, *PM*.

Clearly expressed in the material is the basis of the Progressive party's opposition to the two major parties. Positions taken by the PPA were significantly to the left of even the liberal faction within the Democratic party. In international affairs, Henry Wallace sought detente with the Soviet Union and deescalation of the Cold War. At home, Wallace's Progressives advocated massive social programs, regulation of business activities for public benefit, immediate and total desegregation, and the realignment of the major parties along ideological lines.

The chapter begins with the 29 December 1947 speech in which Wallace announces his presidential candidacy and ends with a public call to the Progressive convention on 24 July 1948.

Chapter III

The Republicans Nominate Thomas E. Dewey

All of the documents in this chapter are from the Thomas E. Dewey Papers, University of Rochester, Rochester, NY. They cover the period from 13 November 1946 to 15 June 1948.

Governor Dewey ran as the Republican candidate for presidency in 1944 against Franklin D. Roosevelt, and in a real sense never stopped running for the next four years. These documents reflect the inner bureaucratic workings of his well-organized political staff. At the top sat Herbert Brownell, Jr., Wall Street attorney, close friend, important adviser, and campaign manager. Most significant matters were directed to Brownell and from him to the other major subordinates found in these pages: Paul E. Lockwood, personal secretary to the governor; Thomas E. Stephens, Brownell's executive secretary; William T. Pheiffer, who worked with Stephens; and Harold E. Talbott, chief fund raiser.

The competition for the nomination involved several Republican hopefuls, the most serious of whom were Senator Robert Taft, former Governor Harold Stassen, Governor Earl Warren, and Senator Arthur Vandenberg, in addition to Dewey, the front runner. The New York governor's most arduous primary challenge came from the Stassen forces in Oregon, a spirited contest that is well documented in this chapter.

Chapter IV

Truman's Classic American Campaign

Documents in this chapter cover the period from the end of the Democratic National Convention in July through the November election. The sources are the same as those cited in Chapter I.

Harry Truman won the nomination over the objections of his party's liberal wing, and in the process saw the solid Democratic South leave the party in revolt against civil rights proposals. Convinced that the best defense was a spirited offense, Truman took to the attack immediately. He called the Republican-controlled 80th Congress back into session late in July and demanded that they pass his comprehensive reform package. Naturally they refused, whereupon the president took to the road to convince the American public that the nation's problems came from a lazy "do-nothing" Congress controlled by the reactionary forces behind the Republican party.

In one of the classics of American political campaigning the president's train crisscrossed up and down the land, with the star attraction frequently emerging.

Chapter V

Challenge from the Right: J. Strom Thurmond and the Dixiecrats

This chapter, with the exception of one article from the *New York Star*, consists entirely of selections from three southern newspapers, covering the period between 7 March 1948 and the November election. The newspapers represented are *The News and Courier* (SC), *The Birmingham Post* (AL), and the *Jackson Daily News* (MS).

While these three newspapers do not reflect the range of southern political opinion during the 1948 campaign, they clearly do illustrate the extraordinarily emotional importance of race and segregation for a substantial number of white southerners.

The often extreme expressions of racial bigotry so freely expressed here indicate several points of historical significance. The depth of white southern attitudes quickly manifest themselves in the uncompromising campaign of Governor J. Strom Thurmond (D.-SC), despite Harry Truman's hard-line foreign policy and longstanding compatibility with southern Democrats. Compromise on the race question meant simply everything for the political consciousness represented in these newspapers. In a larger sense, the lines of opposition to the major civil rights campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s are clearly described in these manifestos of 1948.

Chapter VI

The Progressive Party Campaign

This chapter covers the period between the July convention of the Progressive party of America and the November 1948 election. Sources in this chapter include the Papers of Americans for Democratic Action, collections from the University of Iowa and Harry S Truman Libraries, and selections from the *New York Star*.

This selection of documents indicates that the major opponent faced by the Wallace forces was the liberal wing of the Democratic party. Although the liberals of the ADA and the radicals of the PPA were closer together than any of the election's competing forces, the hostility between them was extraordinary. The logic of this left wing struggle is rather simple. ADA could expect no support for the Democratic ticket from either the States' Rights advocates or from traditional Republican sources. Truman's candidacy appealed neither to opponents of civil rights nor to any significant group of wavering Republicans. The great threat, from the ADA perspective, was the defection of Democratic liberals to a man who enjoyed outstanding New Deal credentials, Roosevelt's former secretary of agriculture and vice-president.

ADA joined with loyal Democrats, Republicans, and Dixiecrats in charging that the Progressives were nothing but a front for the Communist party of the United States, itself a supposed stooge of the Kremlin. ADA equated the major role that American radicals, including Communists, played in the Wallace campaign with total subservience to the Communist cause. While the Wallace campaign continued to produce policies of major ideological challenge to the programs of the Republicans and Democrats, they were attacked solely on the basis of their alleged role in a giant international conspiracy.

Chapter VII

Inside the Dewey Campaign

This selection of documents covers the Dewey campaign from the end of the Republican National Convention in July through the November election. The source for these documents is the same as cited in Chapter III.

These campaign documents are largely confined to correspondence sent from and received in Dewey campaign headquarters in New York City. Much of it concerns political intelligence, mundane office detail, and responses to volunteers. The tone throughout is businesslike and confident, reflecting few of the emotional swings that were characteristic of the Democrats' campaign.

Chapter VIII

Material for Analysis and Evaluation

Public opinion polls (March–July 1948)
Primary election results
Republican National Convention, 21–25 June 1948
Democratic National Convention, 12–14 July 1948
Receipts and expenditures of the parties
Campaign itineraries of the presidential candidates
Democratic and Republican campaign staffs
The Crossley Poll, 15 October 1948
Presidential election results, by the states
Voter participation, by the states
Minor party vote totals, by the states
Analysis of the impact of President Truman's campaign tour

CHAPTER I

The Nomination of Harry S Truman

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CHAPTER II

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<u>PM</u> (NY), 5 May 1948, p. 3.	E48-5 D6
<u>PM</u> (NY), 5 May 1948, p. 5.	E48-5 D7
<u>PM</u> (NY), 6 May 1948, p. 10.	E48-5 D8
<u>PM</u> (NY), 9 May 1948, p. 2.	E48-5 D9

Address by Taylor given before rally sponsored by National Wallace for President Committee, 11 May 1948, IAU.	E48-5 D10
Salary schedule for National Wallace for President Committee, 15 May 1948, IAU.	E48-5 E2
Open letter, Wallace to Joseph V. Stalin, premier of USSR, May 1948, IAU.	E48-5 E8
Stalin's reply to Wallace's open letter. Reprinted from the <u>New York Times</u> , 18 May 1948, IAU.	E48-5 E12
<u>PM</u> (NY), 18 May 1948, p. 5.	E48-5 E14
Meeting of Administrative Committee of National Wallace for President Committee, 22 May 1948, IAU.	E48-5 F1
<u>PM</u> (NY), 26 May 1948, p. 8.	E48-5 F3
<u>PM</u> (NY), 27 May 1948, p. 7.	E48-5 F4
<u>PM</u> (NY), 1 June 1948, p. 4.	E48-5 F5
Wallace interview by E. R. Morrow, Columbia Broadcasting System, 3 June 1948, IAU.	E48-5 F6
<u>PM</u> (NY), 4 June 1948, p. 10.	E48-5 F8
News release from National Wallace for President Committee, 11 June 1948, IAU.	E48-5 F9
Meeting of Administrative Committee of the National Wallace for President Committee, 12-13 June 1948, IAU.	E48-5 F11
Memorandum, Russ Nixon to C. B. Baldwin, campaign manager, Independent Progressive Party (CA), 25 June 1948, IAU.	E48-5 F13
List of suggested labor people to be added to committees for convention assignments, 25 June 1948, IAU.	E48-5 F14
Meeting of Administrative Committee of National Wallace for President Committee, 28 June 1948, IAU.	E48-5 G2
Memorandum, Elinor Kahn, state director, Independent Progressive Party, to Baldwin, July 1948, IAU.	E48-5 G4
Memorandum, Arthur Kahn to Baldwin, 1 July 1948, IAU.	E48-5 G5

Telegram, Chester Bowles, Leon Henderson, and Walter Reuther to Nina C. Dexter, 8 July 1948. Printed in the appendix of the Congressional Record, Papers of Americans for Democratic Action, ser. 2, box 33, folder 4, Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI (hereafter cited as ADA Papers). E48-5
G6

Telegram, Dexter to Henderson, 9 July 1948. Printed in appendix of the Congressional Record, ser. 2, box 33, folder 4, ADA Papers. E48-5
G6

Meeting of Administrative Committee of National Wallace for President Committee, 12 July 1948, IAU. E48-5
G7

Proposed order of business for New Party Founding Convention, 23-25 July 1948, IAU. E48-5
G9

Address by Elmer A. Benson, chairman, National Wallace for President Committee, given at the opening session of the New Party Founding Convention, 23 July 1948, IAU. E48-5
G14

Address by Katherine Van Orden given at the opening session of the New Party Founding Convention, 23 July 1948, IAU. E48-6
A5

Speech given by Fred Stover at the New Party Founding Convention nominating Wallace for president, 24 July 1948, IAU. E48-6
A7

Condensation of Wallace's speech accepting the Progressive party nomination for president, 24 July 1948, IAU. E48-6
A13

Call issued by the National Wallace for President Committee to the National Founding Convention of the New Political Party, 24-25 July 1948, IAU.

CHAPTER III

The Republicans Nominate Thomas E. Dewey

Robert W. Atkins to Thomas E. Dewey, governor of New York, 13 November 1946, Thomas E. Dewey Papers, The University of Rochester Library, Rochester, NY. Published by permission of Thomas E. Dewey, Jr., and John M. Dewey (hereafter cited as Dewey Papers).	E48-7 A4
Dewey to Atkins, 10 December 1946, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 A5
Clellan S. Forsythe to Herbert Brownell, Jr., 24 February 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 A6
Chas. B. Robba to Brownell, 2 March 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 A9
Robert H. Thayer to Paul E. Lockwood, secretary to Governor Dewey, 27 March 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 A10
Notes by John A. Wells of 28 June 1947 with respect to New England Young Republican Conference, 17 May 1947 and the National Young Republican Convention (Milwaukee), 6-8 June 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 A11
Alfred P. Smith, president, Smithport Inc., to Lockwood, 10 July 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B3
Memorandum of George H. Sibley regarding his visit with various persons in certain cities in Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, and Colorado, between 15 August and 12 September 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B4
M. Haab to [?] with notation from R.B.C. [n.d.], Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B5
Joe R. Hanley, lieutenant governor of New York, to Brownell, 3 September 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B6
Forsythe to Thomas E. Stephens, 16 September 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B8
Stephens to Winthrop Aldrich, 19 September 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B9
Frank Kenna, chairman, Queens County Republican Committee, to Brownell, 2 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B10
John A. Wagner, chairman, Republican State Central Committee of Michigan, to Brownell, 13 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B12
Arthur H. Schwartz to Dewey, 14 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 B13

Memorandum, Harold E. Talbott to Brownell, 16 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C1
Memorandum, Lockwood to Brownell, 17 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C2
Jay H. Schmidt, president, Special Toiletries Corporation, to Lockwood, 14 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C3
Henry J. Latham to Dewey, 22 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C4
William T. Pheiffer to Gridley Adams, 24 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C6
Stephens to Robert Augur, 25 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C7
Wells to Brownell, 29 October 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C8
Wagner to Brownell, 3 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C9
Brownell to E. G. Bennett, 4 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C11
Wells to Brownell, 7 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 C13
Wagner to Brownell, 11 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D1
Memorandum, Stephens to Brownell, 13 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D3
Forsythe to Brownell, 18 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D4
Joseph S. Blume to Dewey, 24 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D5
Dewey to Blume, 29 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D6
Memorandum, Dewey to Stephens, 29 November 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D7
Wagner to Brownell, 2 December 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D8
Thayer to Lockwood, 17 December 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D10

Memorandum from Thayer, 17 December 1947. Enclosure in Thayer to Lockwood, 17 December 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D11
Resume of luncheon for Brownell, Los Angeles, 29 December 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 D13
Charles B. Rugg to Brownell, 31 December 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E2
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 31 December 1947, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E4
Memorandum, Stephens to Brownell, 5 January 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E5
Report of the National Draft Eisenhower League Inc., 5 January 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E6
Memorandum, William F. Cuoizzi, Jr., to Anthony Russo, 13 January 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E7
Godfrey Hammond to Brownell, 20 January 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E8
Reports of 21 January 1948 concerning information from California Newspaper Publishers Convention, San Diego, 15-17 January 1948; political observations of Neil Petree on his trip to New York, 10-17 January 1948; and the California Republican Assembly Meeting, Del Monte, 17-19 January 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E10
Pheiffer to B. Roy Anderson, vice-chairman, Dewey for President Committee, Seattle, 7 February 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E13
Memorandum, Harold Keller to Brownell, 13 February 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 E14
Willis Sargent to Dewey, 13 February 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F1
Brownell to Sargent, 26 February 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F6
Rugg to Brownell, 1 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F8
Brownell to C. J. Abbott, 2 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F9
Fred H. Lysons to Harry Wall, chairman, Dewey for President Committee, 5 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F10
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 15 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F11

E.W.S. to George Adams, 18 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F12
Wagner to Brownell, 20 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F13
Pheiffer to John Adams, 25 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 F14
Memorandum, A. T. Howard, chairman, Midwest Republican State Chairmen's Association, to Midwest Republican state chairmen, n.d., Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G1
Lester W. Bowen to Dewey, 30 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G2
Memorandum, Dewey to Brownell, 31 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G3
Joseph R. McCarthy to the people of Wisconsin, 31 March 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G4
Brownell to William O. Alstadt, 3 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G6
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 7 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G7
Resume of 8 April 1948 regarding political comment in Los Angeles, 7-8 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G9
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 8 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G11
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 10 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G12
Robert A. Baker to Lockwood, 13 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-7 G13
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 16 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 A3
W. J. Campbell to Lester Bradshaw, 22 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 A4
Hamilton Hicks to Lockwood, 23 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 A6
Newspaper advertisements prepared by Joseph R. Gerber Company for Dewey for President Committee, 26 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 A8
Warren C. Flynn to Barak T. Mattingly, 26 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 A11

Hicks to Lockwood, 26 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 A13
Hicks to Brownell, 26 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 A14
Joseph A. Macchia to Lockwood, 27 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 B2
Memorandum, Dewey to Lockwood, 27 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 B3
Brownell to John Adams, 28 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 B4
Ford Bond to Lockwood, 28 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 B5
Memorandum, Ralph Becker to Wells, n.d. Enclosure in Bond to Lockwood, 28 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 B6
Fred E. Baker to Dewey, 29 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 B12
Schwartz to Lockwood, 29 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 B13
Clyde A. Lewis to Brownell, 30 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 B14
Frederic C. Smedley to Lockwood, 30 April 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 C2
Itinerary of Governor Dewey's trip to Oregon and Washington, 30 April-11 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 C4
R. E. White to Ray McKaig, 1 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 C14
Memorandum, Baker to Dewey, 2 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D2
Henry E. Mills to Lockwood, 4 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D4
Memorandum, Peter W. Welch to the Republican party voters of Oregon, 4 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D5
Wilbur Toll to Brownell, 5 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D6
Horton Pope to Roger W. Straus, 5 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D7
Memorandum, Charles S. Hamilton, Jr., to Lockwood, 5 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D8

Statement to Oregon teachers by some teacher leaders in New York, 5 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D9
John F. Durr, executive secretary, Republican State Central Committee of Oregon, to Gerald E. Marsh, chairman, Department of Speech, University of California, Berkeley, 6 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D11
Henry A. Wise to Brownell, 7 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D12
Betty Hawley Donnelly, vice-president, New York State Federation of Labor, to Lockwood, 7 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D13
Memorandum, Lockwood to Dewey, 8 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 D14
Lockwood to Bond, 10 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E1
Marsh to Durr, 10 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E2
Portland Automotive Members of Oregon Businessmen for Dewey Committee to fellow automobile dealers, 10 May 1948, Dewey Papers. Letter distributed by Thomas E. Dewey for President Headquarters.	E48-8 E3
Memorandum, Dewey to Harold Stassen, 10 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E4
Memorandum (with hand-written revisions), Dewey to Stassen, 10 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E5
Portland Automotive Members of Oregon Businessmen for Dewey Committee to fellow automobile dealers, 11 May 1948, Dewey Papers. Letter distributed by Thomas E. Dewey for President Headquarters.	E48-8 E6
Telegram, Joe Earley to Dewey headquarters, 11 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E7
Campbell to Lockwood, 11 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E8
Bond to Dewey, 11 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E9
Ray W. Gill, chairman, and Roy A. Ward, secretary, Oregon Farmers for Dewey to "friend," 11 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E11
Lysons to Wall, 12 May 1948, Dewey Papers	E48-8 E12
Brownell to Eileen Ewing Archibald, 12 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E13
Memorandum, Landon K. Thorne, Jr., to Brownell, 12 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 E14

Claude D. Adkins, secretary-treasurer, Republican State Executive Committee of Alabama, to Brownell, 12 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F2
Memorandum, Thorne to Brownell, 12 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F3
Edgar F. Hazleton to Dewey, 12 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F5
Pheiffer to William E. Byers, 13 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F7
Richard S. Wilcox to Dewey, 13 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F8
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 14 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F9
Urban C. Bartholet, assistant manager and trust officer, Seattle First National Bank, to Lockwood, 14 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F10
Memorandum, Fred Greenman to Dewey, 14 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F11
Memorandum, Bixby to Dewey, 14 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F12
Memorandum, Stephens to file, 15 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F13
Sargent to Dewey, 18 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 F14
Hicks to Lockwood, 18 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G1
Memorandum, Breitel to Lockwood, 19 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G3
Winfield A. Schuster to Brownell, 25 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G4
Bart B. Chamberlain, Jr., to Schuster, 26 May 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G5
Brownell to Aldrich, 1 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G9
Forsythe to Stephens, 1 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G10
Schuster to Brownell, 1 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G11

Russell Cobb, president, Cobra Oil Company, to Brownell, 5 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G12
Brownell to Russell S. Boles, 5 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G13
J. B. Hammond to Dewey headquarters, 6 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-8 G14
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 7 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A3
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 8 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A4
Memorandum, Pheiffer to Brownell, 10 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A5
Brownell to Cobb, 10 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A6
Brownell to Aldrich, 11 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A7
Harry B. Albro to Dewey, 12 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A8
Brownell to Henry E. Cramer, permanent chairman, King County Republican Convention, Seattle, 12 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A9
C. D. Moore, president, Quality Shoe Company, to Brownell, 13 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A10
Patrick W. Murphy to Dewey, n.d., Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A12
Claude O. Vardaman, chairman, Republican State Executive Committee of Alabama, to Brownell, 15 June 1948, Dewey Papers.	E48-9 A14

CHAPTER IV

Truman's Classic American Campaign

- "Democratic Platform," in appendix to History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968, 4 vols., ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger and Fred L. Israel (New York, 1971), pp. 3147-56. E48-10
A4
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A14
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B6
- Memorandum from Clark M. Clifford listing the four main objectives regarding Truman's forthcoming campaign [n.d.], Papers of Clark M. Clifford, Harry S Truman Library, Independence, MO (hereafter cited as Clifford Papers). E48-10
B11
- Bryn J. Hovde, president, The New School for Social Research (NY), to Mortimer Hays, 16 August 1948, Papers of Americans for Democratic Action, ser. 2, box 52, folder 6, Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, WI (hereafter cited as ADA Papers). E48-10
C9
- Memorandum, Clifford to Truman, 17 August 1948, Clifford Papers. E48-10
C11
- Granville Hicks to James Loeb, Jr., executive secretary, Americans for Democratic Action, Washington, 1 September 1948, ADA Papers. E48-10
D5
- The President's News Conference of 2 September 1948. Public Papers, pp. 457-61. E48-10
D6
- Memorandum, Joseph L. Rauh, Jr., to Loeb, 3 September 1948, ser. 2, box 76, folder 3, ADA Papers. E48-10
D11
- Loeb to Hicks, 3 September 1948, ser. 2, box 6, folder 52, ADA Papers. E48-10
D14
- Statement by the President: Labor Day, 4 September 1948. Public Papers, p. 462. E48-10
E1
- Rear Platform and Other Informal Remarks in Michigan and Ohio, 6 September 1948. Public Papers, pp. 463-71. E48-10
E2
- Labor Day Address in Cadillac Square, Detroit, 6 September 1948. Public Papers, pp. 475-79. E48-10
E11

The President's News Conference of 9 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 479-82.	E48-10 F1
Loeb to Babette Deutsch, 14 September 1948, ser. 2, box 1, folder 2, ADA Papers.	E48-10 F5
Loeb to Reinhold Niebuhr, Union Theological Seminary (NY), 17 September 1948, ser. 2, box 1, folder 2, ADA Papers.	E48-10 F7
Rear Platform and Other Informal Remarks in Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri, 18 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 492-99.	E48-10 F9
Address at Dexter, Iowa, on the Occasion of the National Plowing Match, 18 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 503-8.	E48-10 G3
Letter to the Chairman, Humanitarian Award Dinner of the Variety Clubs International, 18 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , p. 509.	E48-10 G9
President's Speech, City Hall, San Francisco, California, 22 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 541-44.	E48-10 G10
Address at Lakeside Park, Oakland, California, 22 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 544-48.	E48-10 G13
Rear Platform Remarks in California, 23 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 549-51.	E48-11 A6
Address at Phoenix, Arizona, 24 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 565-67.	E48-11 A9
Address at Bonham, Texas, 27 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 592-96.	E48-11 A12
Rear Platform and Other Informal Remarks in Texas and Oklahoma, 28 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 596-97.	E48-11 B2
Address in Oklahoma City, 28 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 609-14.	E48-11 B4
Rear Platform and Other Informal Remarks in Oklahoma and Missouri, 29 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 614-15, 622-31.	E48-11 B9
Address at Skelly Stadium, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 29 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 634-37.	E48-11 C7
Radio Address Opening the Nationwide Community Chest Campaigns, 30 September 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 657-58.	E48-11 C11
Rear Platform and Other Informal Remarks in Kentucky and West Virginia, 1 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 658-59.	E48-11 C12

Address at Convention Hall in Philadelphia, 6 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 678-82.	E48-11 C14
Rear Platform and Other Informal Remarks in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, 7 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 683-87, 694-99.	E48-11 D5
Rear Platform and Other Informal Remarks in New York, 8 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 699-719.	E48-11 E1
Address in St. Paul at the Municipal Auditorium, 13 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 770-74.	E48-11 E11
Rear Platform Remarks in Minnesota and Wisconsin, 14 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 774-77.	E48-11 F1
Rear Platform Remarks in Logansport, Indiana, 15 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 795-97.	E48-11 F5
Address in Indianapolis at the Indiana World War Memorial, 15 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 801-6.	E48-11 F8
Memorandum, Edmund I. Kaufmann to Truman, 16 October 1948, Papers of Oscar L. Chapman, Harry S Truman Library, Independence, MO (hereafter cited as Chapman Papers).	E48-11 F14
Oscar L. Chapman, undersecretary, Department of the Interior, to J. Howard McGrath, chairman, Democratic National Committee, 18 October 1948, Chapman Papers.	E48-11 G5
Thomas W. Walsh to Chapman, 14 October 1948. Enclosure in Chapman to McGrath, 18 October 1948, Chapman Papers.	E48-11 G6
Address at the State Capitol, Raleigh, North Carolina, 19 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 818-22.	E48-11 G9
Address at the State Fairgrounds, Raleigh, North Carolina, 19 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 822-27.	E48-11 G13
Address on Radio Program Sponsored by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union Campaign Committee, 21 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 828-29.	E48-12 A7
Address in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 23 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 838-43.	E48-12 A9
Statement by President on Israel, 24 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 843-44.	E48-12 A14
Rear Platform Remarks in Indiana, 25 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 844-45.	E48-12 B1
Rear Platform Remarks in Elkhart, Indiana, 26 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 856-63.	E48-12 B3

Rear Platform Remarks in Framingham, Massachusetts, 27 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 880-81.	E48-12 B11
Address at Mechanics Hall in Boston, 27 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 882-86.	E48-12 B13
Rear Platform and Other Informal Remarks in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York, 28 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 886-87, 901-8.	E48-12 C3
Address in Madison Square Garden, New York City, 28 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 908-14.	E48-12 C12
Address at Democratic Women's Club luncheon, Bronx, New York, 29 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 918-22.	E48-12 D5
Address in Harlem, New York, Upon Receiving the Franklin Roosevelt Award, 29 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 923-25.	E48-12 D10
Address at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York City, 29 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 925-30.	E48-12 D12
Rear Platform Remarks in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, 30 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 930-31.	E48-12 E3
Address at the Kiel Auditorium, St. Louis, Missouri, 30 October 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 934-39.	E48-12 E5
Radio Remarks in Independence on Election Eve, 1 November 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 939-40.	E48-12 E10
Remarks at the Victory Celebration in Independence, 3 November 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 940-41.	E48-12 E11
Remarks in Missouri, Indiana, and Ohio While En Route to Washington, 4 November 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , pp. 941-42.	E48-12 E12
Remarks Upon Arrival at the White House, 5 November 1948. <u>Public Papers</u> , p. 942.	E48-12 E13
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CHAPTER V

CHALLENGE FROM THE RIGHT: J. STROM THURMOND AND THE DIXIECRATS

<u>The News and Courier</u> (Charleston, SC), 3 March 1948, p. 4.	E48-13 A4
<u>The News and Courier</u> , 7 March 1948, p. 4.	E48-13 A5
<u>The News and Courier</u> , 30 March 1948, p. 4.	E48-13 A6
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> (AL), 1 May 1948, p. 1.	E48-13 A7
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 1 May 1948, p. 8.	E48-13 A8
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 3 May 1948, p. 1.	E48-13 A9
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 3 May 1948, p. 2.	E48-13 A10
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 3 May 1948, p. 6.	E48-13 A11
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 3 May 1948, p. 13.	E48-13 A12
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 5 May 1948, p. 1.	E48-13 A13
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 5 May 1948, p. 6.	E48-13 A14
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 12 May 1948, p. 9.	E48-13 B1
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 17 May 1948, p. 1.	E48-13 B2
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 17 May 1948, p. 5.	E48-13 B3
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 28 May 1948, p. 11.	E48-13 B4
<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 2 June 1948, p. 1.	E48-13 B5

<u>The Birmingham Post</u> , 2 June 1948, p. 6.	E48-13 B6
<u>The News and Courier</u> , 12 June 1948, p. 4.	E48-13 B7
<u>The News and Courier</u> , 14 June 1948, p. 1.	E48-13 B8
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CHAPTER VI

The Progressive Party Campaign

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F3

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B9

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B12

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C3

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C6

CHAPTER VII

Inside the Dewey Campaign

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CHAPTER VIII

Material for Analysis and Evaluation

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