

H-Net Reviews

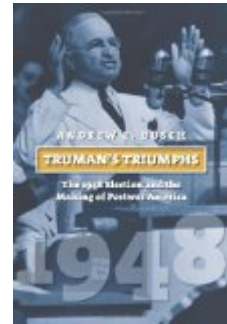
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andrew E. Busch. *Truman's Triumphs: The 1948 Election and the Making of Postwar America*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012. 272 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1866-8; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7006-1867-5.

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Beyond “Dewey Defeats Truman”: The Broader Context of the 1948 Election

In *Truman's Triumphs*, Andrew E. Busch (Crown Professor of Government and George R. Roberts Fellow at Claremont McKenna College) provides an insightful analysis of the 1948 election and its broader implications for American society. Busch's work spans the entire year of 1948, culminating with the election on November 2, 1948. Busch also provides context from events immediately before and after the pivotal election. Two years prior, in the 1946 midterm election, Republicans gained solid control of both the House of Representatives (246–188) and the Senate (51–45) for the first time since 1928. It was on this high tide that Republicans entered the political fray in 1948. Governor of New York and Republican presidential nominee Thomas E. Dewey squared off against Democratic incumbent President Harry S. Truman. Two third-party challenges, Henry A. Wallace of the Progressive Party and J. Strom Thurmond of the States' Rights Democratic Party, splintered from the Democratic Party to challenge openly Truman's campaign. When the dramatic election ended, the results surprised many Americans. Truman defeated Dewey and the Democrats won a landslide. Busch clearly demonstrates that the importance of the election was not solely Truman's well-known presidential victory. Democrats also gained seventy-five seats in the House of Representatives, nine seats in the Senate, five governorships, and an overall advantage in state legislatures. The decisive 1948 election meant that Democrats controlled the presidency, the House, the Senate, and they held notable advantages among state governments.

Busch's purpose in *Truman's Triumphs* is straightforward. His goal is to analyze the 1948 election, paying heightened attention to the nomination process, the congressional elections, and public opinion. Joining other scholars, Busch argues that the 1948 election was a validation of the domestic policy of the New Deal, of the foreign policy of containment, and of the federal policy advocating civil rights. Busch contributes the unique interpretation that the 1948 election demonstrated both the “resilience” and “vulnerability” of the New Deal coalition (p. 210). He points out that although Truman trailed in the polls and came from behind, he also had significant advantages such as the New Deal coalition. In addition, Busch proves that although the Democrats suffered from obvious schisms, the Republicans were less noticeably but no less critically divided.

Truman's Triumphs is deeply researched and supported by a variety of sources. Busch provides extensive notes documenting memoirs, speeches, memos, polls, newspapers, magazines, and a wide array of secondary sources. In addition, Busch provides useful appendices that include the 1948 Republican primary results, the 1948 presidential general election results, and both Truman's nomination acceptance speech (July 15, 1948) and inaugural address (January 20, 1949). Rounding out the work is a robust and highly informative bibliographic essay.

Busch organizes his work into seven chapters. First,

he contextualizes the 1948 election, both domestically through the economy and internationally through the legacy of World War II. Economically, inflation was the key issue and union strength was potent, with approximately fifteen million union members nationwide. Also, improved economic opportunities resulted in significant migration of African Americans from the South to the North, increasing their political power and making civil rights a heightened issue. Internationally, the Cold War congealed as Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania all became Soviet satellites by 1948.

Second, Busch analyzes the candidates for the presidency in the 1948 election. These included Democrats Harry Truman, Henry Wallace, and Strom Thurmond. Standing in opposition were Republicans Thomas Dewey, Robert Taft, Harold Stassen, and Douglas MacArthur. Busch highlights the importance of “The Politics of 1948,” a planning document for Truman’s campaign composed in late 1947 by attorney James Rowe and presidential advisor Clark Clifford. The plan sought election gains with organized labor, Western farmers, African Americans, and Jewish voters. Busch underscores the fact that Truman adopted the document and writes that it “laid the groundwork for his entire 1948 strategy” (pp. 35-36).

Third, Busch examines the divisions in both political parties, focusing mainly on the primary elections. Among Democrats, Henry Wallace early on challenged Truman from the left by announcing his candidacy on December 29, 1947. Truman, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) successfully parried Wallace’s early attacks. Wallace’s accommodating stance on Communism eventually suffered from worsened international conditions resulting from the February 25, 1948 Communist coup in Czechoslovakia and the Berlin airlift. Among Republicans, Stassen won important primary victories in Wisconsin and Nebraska, where he garnered roughly 40 percent and 43 percent of the vote respectively.

Fourth, Busch explores the conventions of the Republican, Democratic, States’ Rights Democratic, and Progressive parties. The four separate conventions occurred in approximately four weeks during late June and July 1948, with three of the four held in Philadelphia. Busch stresses the unique importance of the Republican convention on June 21, 1948 due to the substantial rifts among Republicans. Busch contends that “the Republican nomination was the arena where some of the most important questions of 1948 had already been decided” (p. 103). The outcome was the unanimous nomination

of Dewey on the third ballot, with governor of California Earl Warren chosen as the candidate for vice president.

Fifth, Busch details the general election campaigns beginning after the conventions. Busch underscores Truman’s “Turnip Day” special session of Congress beginning July 26, 1948. Truman demanded that Congress pass legislation on the central issues outlined in both his January 7, 1948 State of the Union message and his February 2, 1948 civil rights address. Truman gave Congress only two weeks, during which time Congress passed some minor legislation but nothing of import. Such a bold move forced Republicans to convert the rhetoric of their own platform into action or simply do nothing. They chose the latter. Even though Dewey appeared ahead throughout the entire election, Truman’s active campaign won 24 million votes, 28 states, and 304 electoral votes, while Dewey’s passive campaign won 22 million votes, 16 states, and 189 electoral votes. Even though the result was the fifth consecutive presidential victory for Democrats, Busch wisely reminds readers how close the election was. Truman collected only 49.5 percent of the national popular vote, the third lowest percentage for an incumbent since 1832.

Sixth, Busch assesses the congressional and state elections that also occurred during the 1948 election. Busch transcends the traditional narrative focused solely on the presidential contest and delves deeply into the other elections where Democrats won a landslide. Democrats gained nine seats in the Senate, resulting in a 54–42 majority. In addition, Democrats added seventy-five seats in the House for a 262–172 majority. Perhaps more importantly, this success ushered in future Democratic leaders such as Lyndon B. Johnson, Hubert H. Humphrey, and Estes Kefauver. Finally, Democrats won five governorships for a 28–20 advantage nationwide and reaped a 19–16 lead in state legislatures.

Seventh, Busch considers the aftermath of the elections, paying particular attention to how the election shaped postwar America. The 1948 election would be the last election in which television was not a significant factor. It would be the first election cementing bipartisan support of containment. In the end, Truman connected to specific groups with issues that did not always resonate as strongly with the broader public. Foreign policy and world events certainly helped Truman, as did his effective choice for vice president, Alben W. Barkley.

Busch is adept at leveraging humorous anecdotes. He relates the savvy intelligence capabilities of the Dewey campaign to the less stellar Taft campaign during the Re-

publican primary. The Taft campaign ordered ten thousand copies of *This Week in Philadelphia* for delegates, “not realizing until it was too late that Dewey’s picture was on the cover” (pp. 100-101). Most importantly, Busch reveals influential factors propelling Truman towards victory that are not commonly examined. As he convincingly contends, “under the surface, the picture was more hopeful for Truman’s reelection prospects than observers suspected. There were signs that could have

been pieced together but rarely were” (p. 152). In *Truman’s Triumphs*, Busch illuminates many of those “signs,” articulates how they contributed to a landslide victory for Democrats, and explains the far-reaching consequences of the election, namely keeping the New Deal intact, advancing civil rights, and securing bipartisan support of containment that would last throughout most of the Cold War.

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