

## Introduction

The elections of 1952 and 1956 marked the only times the Republican Party won the White House between 1932 and 1968.<sup>1</sup> In 1952, President Harry Truman's popularity had fallen so drastically that the Democratic Party never seriously considered renominating him. With only two major candidates, Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, the 1952 election resulted in a landslide victory for the Republican Party. When investigating this important U.S. Presidential election, several areas should be evaluated. These include the context of the election, party nominations, candidates, campaigns, and the election outcome. This will give a better understanding of the 1952 election and its effects on U.S. politics.

## Context of Election

First, we need to look at who was in the White House and Congress in order to determine the dominant party at this time. The Democrats had been dominating both the White House and Congress. However, in 1952 the Republicans obtained control over the House of Representatives and the Senate.<sup>2</sup> This was not again accomplished until George W. Bush came into office. The incumbent President in 1952 was Harry Truman. Truman had taken the office of President after Franklin Roosevelt died in 1945. He was then formally elected as President in 1948, so he was eligible for a second term in 1952. However, because his popularity had been rapidly declining in the U.S., the Democratic Party thought they would be more successful if they did not renominate him. As a result, there was no incumbent president running for re-election in 1952.<sup>3</sup>

There were several controversial issues in the election year. One of Eisenhower's campaign slogans in attacking the Democrats was, "Korea, Communism, and

Corruption.”<sup>4</sup> The war in Korea, Democratic leniency on communism, and bribery scandals were all issues that brought down Truman’s popularity. At this point, Eisenhower already had an advantage by not belonging to the Democratic Party.<sup>5</sup> There was no particular issue that was roiling the country at this time, however. Having brought an end to World War II, the country was enjoying immense prosperity. The 1950s seemed to be the calm before the storm in terms of the various movements that would take place in the 1960s.

The political issues that surrounded the election saw a change in ideology. During the previous Roosevelt and Truman administrations, the Republican Party had consistently taken the position of reducing U.S. intervention in foreign affairs. However, in the case of Eisenhower, the Republican Party willingly said they would do anything possible to end the conflict in Korea.<sup>6</sup> The Republican Party also differed from previous elections in that it actively pursued support from women. By acknowledging that they could increase their votes by appealing to women, they concentrated on family issues. Women also began to see the Republicans as the political party which could help them financially.<sup>7</sup>

Lastly, as I have already discussed, the Democratic Party had been experiencing a period of dominance. They were trying to maintain twenty years of control of the White House. However, the scandals of war, communism, and corruption resulted in a weakened Democratic Party. While the Republican Party was taking an active position on the issue of Korea, the Democrats were accused of bending to the Soviets by allowing North Korea to fall to the Communists. The Democratic Party had also been surrounded by various bribery accusations. The Republicans used these scandals to their advantage

and pledged to eliminate government corruption. They also stepped away from the Democrats by promising to balance the budget. The Democratic Party, on the other hand, tried to rely on their traditional support in the area of labor. Having had immense success with Roosevelt's "New Deal," Stevenson and other Democrats tried to persuade the American people that they would continue to create new jobs with better wages and insurance. In the end, however, this was not enough.

## **Party Primaries and Nominations**

In 1952, Party Conventions were the most important part of the nominating process. Primaries existed, but candidates knew that primaries would not win them the nomination. The 1952 Republican National Convention is considered to be one of the most dramatic, and possibly violent, conventions in U.S. history. Also, the Democratic National Convention is unique in that it was the last time that a candidate won the nomination after more than one ballot.<sup>8</sup> The 1952 conventions also were different from any other in that they were both the first televised conventions.<sup>9</sup> For the first time, the American public could view the party nomination process. It was this event that began the rapid intertwining of politics and media.

By 1952, Republicans were understandably frustrated. They lost four straight presidential elections to Franklin D. Roosevelt. But losing to Harry Truman in 1948 when all polls said Thomas Dewey was a slam-dunk was too much for them to take. The party was split between the more conservative, isolationist wing, who wanted to nominate Senator Robert Taft from Ohio and the liberal wing who supported Eisenhower. Despite the violence of the convention, in which fistfights broke out, Eisenhower won the nomination on the first ballot with 845 votes.<sup>10</sup> Other candidates included Robert Taft with 280 votes, Earl Warren with 77, and Douglas MacArthur with 4 votes.<sup>11</sup> Nominated for Eisenhower's Vice President was Richard Nixon. Nixon had obtained widespread fame for his role on the House Un-American Activities Committee. He seemed a good choice at the time based on his obvious commitment to rid the U.S. of Communists. However, as I will discuss later, a scandal surrounding Nixon eventually surfaced which could have had serious impact on Eisenhower.

The Democratic Party, on the other hand, had closer results in the nominating process. It took three ballots to select Adlai Stevenson. Of the 616 votes needed, Estes Kefauver from Tennessee received 370 on the first ballot, while Stevenson received 273, and Richard Brevard Russell trailed closely behind with 268. By the third ballot the totals had changed to Kefauver with 275, Stevenson with 617, and Russell with 261. Stevenson won the nomination with only 2 votes. John Jackson Sparkman, from Alabama, was nominated as Stevenson's Vice President.<sup>12</sup> For all the candidates, the nomination strategy was to try to persuade delegates at the actual convention. Stevenson actually ran a "Draft Stevenson" movement. Placing advertisements and collecting donations, the Draft Stevenson Committee mounted a grassroots effort to swing the nomination to their candidate.<sup>13</sup> None pursued a strictly "outsider" strategy. Also, there were no significant third party candidates in the 1952 election that could have influenced the outcome in any way.

## Candidates

Adlai Stevenson was born in Los Angeles and was the grandson of former Vice President Adlai E. Stevenson. He studied at Princeton University and worked as a journalist and a lawyer. During the Second World War, Stevenson went on several missions to Europe for the State Department and in 1948 he was elected as the Governor of Illinois. It was here that he earned a reputation for honesty and efficiency. He introduced a series of reforms including a merit system for the state police, improvements in state mental hospitals and greater state aid for schools.<sup>14</sup> He was also known for cleaning up much of the corruption which had dominated Illinois politics. In terms of his personal appeal, Stevenson was thought of as a very witty, intellectual liberal. Even after his defeat, Stevenson received many letters from people who voted against him stating their admiration of him.<sup>15</sup>

During Adlai Stevenson's four-year term as governor, he naturally focused mainly on domestic issues. Stevenson, however, had always believed that foreign policy issues were very important. In 1951 Stevenson addressed Northwestern University's convocation. In his speech, he talked about the fact that the main foreign problems regarded militarism. With World War II fresh in mind, Stevenson called for international cooperation.<sup>16</sup> He also viewed HUAC and other anti-Communist organizations as dangerous. Stevenson argued that having the right to freely join political organizations in order to express one's view was one of the fundamental rights an American has. He was once quoted as saying that it was not a good idea to "burn down the house in order to kill the rats."<sup>17</sup> In other words, he did not approve of Communism, but he also did not support infringing on others' rights in order to find potential Communists.

Dwight D. Eisenhower was born in 1890 in Texas and raised in Kansas. He excelled in sports in high school, and received an appointment to West Point. He commanded the Allied Forces landing in North Africa in November 1942. And on D-Day, 1944, he was Supreme Commander of the troops invading France.<sup>18</sup> Eisenhower became President of Columbia University after the war. He also took leave to assume Supreme Command over the new NATO forces being assembled in 1951. Republican emissaries to his headquarters near Paris persuaded him to run for President in 1952.<sup>19</sup> His vast military experience also proved to enhance his personal appeal. The American people knew Eisenhower as a military war hero and it seemed that that was all they needed to know.

On domestic issues, Eisenhower had a conservative ideology. However, differing from past Republicans, Eisenhower felt there must be an intervention in Korea in order to bring about a solution to the problem. He had promised to end the war because he had experienced it first-hand. He also vowed to clean up the political corruption of the Truman administration. Eisenhower also made sure that there were no Communist sympathies evident in his campaign. The Republicans sent out people such as Dewey, McCarthy, and Nixon to campaign against the Democrats with their antiwar, anti-bribery, and anti-Communist message.

## **The Election Campaign**

The first obvious difference between the 1952 Presidential Election campaigns and any other previous election was the role of television. After the televised conventions of 1952, the impact of TV on politics was immense. The most significant innovation related to the role of television in the 1952 campaign was undoubtedly Eisenhower's use of short spot commercials to enhance his television image.<sup>20</sup> The Eisenhower campaign utilized the talent of Rosser Reeves, an advertising executive, to devise a series of short spots. They appeared, just like product ads, during commercial breaks in standard television programming slots. Not only did this strategy break new ground for political campaigning, but also many observers have argued it helped Eisenhower to craft a friendly, charming persona that contributed to his eventual electoral success. Stevenson made it easier for the Eisenhower campaign by refusing to participate in this type of electronic campaigning.<sup>21</sup> Although Stevenson did produce some television commercials for the 1956 campaign, he was never able to overcome Eisenhower's popularity. Also, no substantial imbalances between the parties in regards to campaign resources have been found.

The general issues were, as I have already discussed, the war in Korea, government corruption, and Communism. There were no real "October Surprises" that influenced the outcome of the election. However, there were allegations that Nixon had an illegal "slush" fund in the 1952 campaign. It was after this that Nixon gave his famous and very successful "Checkers" speech in order to regain the support of the American people.<sup>22</sup> His speech was successful and there was no effect on the Eisenhower campaign. The role of Harry Truman, the incumbent President at the time, was not a



very big one. Truman had asked Adlai Stevenson to run for President. He claimed that Stevenson had the gubernatorial record as well as military credentials that were needed to fulfill the office of U.S. President.<sup>23</sup> Other than that, due to his decline of popularity, Truman was forced to take a backseat in the election. It should also be noted that there were no major third party candidates in the election. In fact, Lawrence Longley and Neal Peirce found that Eisenhower and Stevenson combined obtained 99.5% of the popular vote, with “Others” receiving only 0.5% of the popular vote.<sup>24</sup>

Surveys and polls taken before the election seemed to indicate an Eisenhower win, although not by the landslide which occurred. In a Gallup poll before the 1952 election, it was predicted that Eisenhower would win with 51% of the popular vote.<sup>25</sup> However, new advances in polling techniques had been made as well. Univac, the only general-purpose computer of its day, was used on the election night to predict the winner. Univac predicted 100-1 odds that Eisenhower would win by a landslide.<sup>26</sup> Although this was not an early poll, Univac was the beginning of a series of rapid developments that would occur in the area of forecasting elections.

## **Election Outcome**

The election resulted in an overwhelming victory for Eisenhower and the Republican Party. The totals for the popular vote were 55.1% for Eisenhower and 44.4% for Stevenson. Electoral votes totaled 442 for Eisenhower and 89 for Stevenson.<sup>27</sup> According to the electoral map, Stevenson's only region of support was from the deep-south. He won nine states: Alabama, Louisiana, Kentucky, Arkansas, South Carolina, Mississippi, Georgia, West Virginia, and North Carolina.<sup>28</sup> Eisenhower picked up all the other states. The 1952 Presidential Election is regarded as a clear-cut election, with no quirks or controversies in regards to the Electoral College.

The 1952 election is historically significant for several reasons. First, it was the last time in U.S. history that conventions served as the primary mechanism in the party nomination process. The Democratic Party had three ballots and although the Republicans selected Eisenhower on the first ballot, the Republicans also had a highly contested nominating process. A second reason that the 1952 Election is historically significant is that it marked the introduction of television in politics. The conventions were televised for the first time in American history, and political commercials were created as well. It was this event that influenced all other elections after 1952. The techniques used by Eisenhower are continued by present day nominees including George W. Bush and John Kerry. In conclusion, not only is the 1952 Presidential Election an historically significant election in our country's history, it has also had lasting effects on politics and media. Whether these effects have been positive or negative is widely debated by political scientists. Hopefully over time, we can continue to evaluate these effects in order to fully grasp the impact of the 1952 Election on U.S. politics.

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- <sup>12</sup> "Election of 1952," *Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library*.
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- <sup>15</sup> David Greenberg, "Adlai Stevenson: The Last of the Beautiful Losers," <http://slate.msn.com/default.aspx?id=85306>, 30 June 2000, [accessed 11 May 2004].
- <sup>16</sup> "Adlai Stevenson II: A Man Ahead of his Time," *Illinois Periodicals Online*, <http://www.lib.niu.edu/ipo/ihy940469.html>, April 1994, [accessed 11 May 2004].
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- <sup>24</sup> Lawrence Longley and Neal Peirce, *The Electoral College Primer 2000*, (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1999, p. 184.
- <sup>25</sup> Kenneth Warren, *In Defense of Public Opinion Polling*, (Westview Press: Cambridge), 2001, p.63.
- <sup>26</sup> Leslie Goff, "Univac Predicts Winner of 1952 Election," *CNN.com*, <http://www.cnn.com/TECH/computing/9904/30/1952.idg/>, 30 April 1999, [accessed 11 May 2004].
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