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World War II–Era Elections: 1942–1958

The U.S. elections from 1942 to 1958 helped set the electoral contexts for the second half of the twentieth century. As the Soviet Union forced most of Eastern Europe into its empire, it shifted from wartime ally to postwar antagonist. The fall of China to communist control in 1949 only increased the specter that revolutionary communism posed a grave threat to Western democracies. This entry concentrates on the foreign policies that shaped these elections.

The 1942 Congressional Election

The party winning the presidency usually gains seats in the House and Senate in the presidential election and then loses seats in the following midterm congressional elections. This surge-decline pattern held true in the 1940 and 1942 elections to the House of Representatives. In President Franklin D. Roosevelt's reelection in 1940, the Democrats gained five seats in the House, giving them a 105-seat edge over the Republicans. In 1942, the Democrats lost 45 seats in the House, although they retained a comfortable majority. Following

their overwhelming 75–17 edge over the Republicans established in the 1936 elections, the Senate Democrats lost six, three, and nine seats in the 1938, 1940, and 1942 elections, respectively, while still retaining a 57 to 38-seat lead over the Republicans after 1942.

The 1944 Presidential Election

President Roosevelt's average approval rating in the polls had grown steadily from 59 percent in 1939 to 76 percent in 1942 as Americans accepted his leadership of the war effort after Pearl Harbor. (This and subsequent approval ratings exclude those with no opinion.) The Democratic strategy in 1944 was to make the reelection of Roosevelt appear indispensable to winning the war and preparing for the peace. The end of the war in Europe was in sight by 1944. Supreme Commander Dwight D. Eisenhower led the Allied landing at Normandy in June. Italy had formally surrendered in September 1943, and U.S. and British forces succeeded in retaking Rome in June 1944 and Paris in August. However, the final victory over Germany did not come until May 1945. In November 1944, Roosevelt was still seen as critical to the U.S. war effort.

Although Roosevelt's health was failing rapidly, he was able to present himself to the public as a forceful and capable leader. The war strategy was working, and plans for a postwar international organization that would become the United Nations (UN) were taking shape. Representatives of Britain, China, the Soviet Union, and the United States met in August at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., to discuss the initial proposals. Thomas Dewey, who won the Republican nomination for president, did not want to revive memories of Republican opposition to the League of Nations after World War I, and he promised that his campaign would not make U.S. participation in an international organization a partisan issue in the campaign.

The war in Europe did create political problems within the Democrat's ethnic coalition. When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, the Soviet army had occupied a large section of eastern Poland, which the Soviet Union had lost after World War I. Polish American organizations voiced support of the prewar boundary. Roosevelt gave vague assurances that the United States would give "moral support" to the Polish government in negotiations with the Soviet Union, which was sufficient to neutralize the boundary issue among Polish American leaders, despite the fact that the Poles were losing 300,000 soldiers in a futile uprising in Warsaw against the German army in August 1944.

Roosevelt also managed to avoid a potential schism among Jewish Democrats over Jewish immigration to Palestine. Britain set an annual limit on Jewish immigration for five years, with no more immigration after April 1944. A proposed congressional resolution in 1944 calling for free immigration into Palestine pressured Roosevelt to provide whatever assurances he could to Jewish leaders, short of violating a pledge that the status of Palestine would not be altered without consultation with both Arabs and Jews. Roosevelt said that he had not approved the British policy and authorized Jewish leaders to say, "When future decisions are reached full justice will be done to those who seek a Jewish national home." Roosevelt thus defused this issue for the duration of the campaign.

Roosevelt defeated Dewey 53 percent to 45 percent, the narrowest of the presi-

dent's four victories. With many soldiers overseas, turnout, at 56 percent, was 6 percentage points lower than 1940. The Democrats regained 21 seats in the House of Representatives and maintained their Senate majority at 58 seats. Roosevelt would die in April, just four months into his fourth term. Vice President Harry S. Truman would become president.

The 1946 Congressional Election

With the demobilization of U.S. troops following Japan's surrender on August 10, 1945, the 1946 election would be fought primarily on domestic issues. The Republican Party gained 56 House seats and 13 Senate seats, winning control of both chambers. An assertive Republican congressional leadership tried to dominate the national policy agenda, and Truman adopted an oppositional veto strategy. Truman would campaign against the Republican Congress in the 1948 election, labeling it the "Do Nothing" Congress.

The 1948 Election

The 1948 election turned on domestic issues. Samuel Lubell contended that economic and farm issues led German American isolationists to return to the Democratic camp, which they had abandoned in 1940. Domestically, the Republican Congress's passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 over President Truman's veto authorized presidents to intervene in collective bargaining disputes by imposing back-to-work orders and mandatory cooling-off periods. Labor unions called Taft-Hartley the "slave labor act." Its passage gave unions a powerful incentive to get out the vote for Truman's reelection. Truman's whistle-stop railroad campaign helped bring Democrats back to their partisan moorings, and Truman support gained rapidly at the end of the campaign, after pollsters had ceased surveying the public.

Bipartisan Foreign Policy and the "Water's Edge"

Once the national party conventions nominated President Truman and New York governor Thomas E. Dewey as the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, Truman and Dewey both pledged to continue the bipartisan foreign policy that marked the 1944 election. In accepting the Democratic nomination, President Truman stated, "Partisanship should stop at the water's edge; and I shall continue to preach that through this whole campaign."

Dewey's commitment to bipartisanship in the 1948 campaign strategy was based on early polls that showed him with a seemingly insurmountable lead over Truman. Anticipating victory, Dewey wished to campaign as president-elect and enjoy full latitude in policy options in his coming administration.

Although Dewey's bipartisan foreign policy strategy accounts for the minor role that foreign issues played in the 1948 election, no previous U.S. election was preceded by as many important international crises and longer-term international developments. As the Iron Curtain closed around the states of Eastern Europe, officials in the U.S. government worked toward a bipartisan plan to combat the expansion of communism. In March 1947, Truman proposed the Truman Doctrine, which called for $400 million in economic and military assistance to Turkey and Greece. Arrangements for the Marshall Plan were initiated in June 1947 to support the economic recovery of Western Europe. Public attitudes toward the Soviet Union hardened rapidly. Large

majorities supported the anti-Soviet containment policy exemplified by the Truman Doctrine.

Other foreign crises threatened to influence the 1948 election. When Czechoslovakia came under Communist Party control in spring 1948, former secretary of state James Byrnes warned that hostilities might break out in Eastern Europe within four weeks. The fear of war increased when, on June 23, the Soviet Union cut all transportation links to Berlin in response to the plans of the United States, Britain, and France to unify their occupation zones and to permit the formation of an independent West German government. President Truman implemented a full-scale airlift of supplies into Berlin to counter the Soviet blockade, something that Dewey supported.

The Truman administration was itself divided on the recognition of Israel as a state. Many in the Departments of State and Defense challenged Truman's preference for a policy endorsing the partition of Palestine and the creation of a Jewish state. Eleven minutes after Israel proclaimed its existence at midnight, May 15, 1948, Truman announced U.S. recognition of Israel as "the de facto authority of the new State of Israel." Both the Democratic and the Republican Party platforms endorsed the administration's policy.

The possible infiltration of the U.S. government by domestic Communists became a potentially important campaign issue in the summer. Whittaker Chambers, a self-confessed former Communist, testified at congressional hearings that he had been connected to a ring that sought to infiltrate government agencies and that Alger Hiss, a former high-level official in the State Department, had passed government secrets to the Soviets in the 1930s. President Truman avoided vulnerability on this issue by attacking the Progressive Party candidate, Henry Wallace, for that party's alleged ties to the Communist Party. Dewey chose not to exploit the charges of communist influence in the government.

Because Dewey did not criticize Truman on foreign policy, domestic issues divided Truman and Dewey voters more than did foreign policy. Truman voters were more likely than Dewey voters to oppose the Taft-Hartley Act and to support rent and price controls. Truman's victory, then, is attributable to the fact that he successfully linked his party and his policies to the continuing popularity of the New Deal.

Strom Thurmond's anti–civil rights campaign did win four southern states and 39 electoral votes. However, with Truman's unexpectedly large margin over Dewey outside the South, Truman overcame the defection of Thurmond's states rights wing of the Democratic Party.

The Truman sweep carried over to Congress. As the surge-decline hypothesis predicts, the Democrats also gained 75 House seats and 9 Senate seats. The Democrats thus comfortably regained control of both chambers, which they had lost in the 1946 Republican tide.

The Congressional Elections of 1950

In the midterm congressional elections of 1950, the Democrats lost 29 seats in the House of Representatives but retained control. In the Senate, the Democrats lost six seats, emerging with a narrow margin of 48–47, with one independent. The fall of the Nationalist (Kuomintang) regime in China, the outbreak of the Korean War, and the Senate hearings conducted by Senator Joseph McCarthy together formed much of the

foreign policy context for the 1950 and 1952 elections. The military collapse of Nationalist China began in Manchuria in September 1948. The Nationalists abandoned the mainland to Mao Tse-tung's communist insurgency and established a temporary capital on Formosa (Taiwan) on December 8, 1949, precipitating a subsequent partisan controversy over "who lost China."

In June 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, prompting the United States to mount a defense of South Korea under the terms of a United Nations mandate. U.S. general Douglas MacArthur led a landing force at Inchon on September 15, 1950. MacArthur subsequently ordered his troops to cross the 38th Parallel dividing North and South Korea. On October 4, the Chinese communist regime entered the war in defense of North Korea. The conflict soon developed into a military stalemate. Charging that General MacArthur had publicly questioned administration policies in the Far East, President Truman relieved him of command on April 11, 1951.

In February 1950, Senator McCarthy began quoting figures on the number of Communists and "communist sympathizers" in the State Department, charges that seemed to take on more credibility with the conviction of Alger Hiss on charges of perjury. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee convened an investigation of McCarthy's charges in March 1950, giving McCarthy a platform for his allegations. In both 1950 and 1952, Republicans attacked Democrats with the slogan "Korea, Communism, and Corruption."

The 1952 Presidential Election

The public's impatience over the military stalemate in Korea contributed to a sharp decline in Truman's approval rating from 80 percent in January 1949 to a low of 28 percent in November 1951. Truman resolved early in 1951 not to run for reelection, though he allowed his name to be entered in the New Hampshire primary to help derail the candidacy of Senator Estes Kefauver. Dwight Eisenhower subsequently declared himself a Republican and successfully gained the nomination for president, defeating Senator Robert Taft of Ohio. The Democrats nominated Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois.

Stevenson depicted the Korean conflict as a just fight against tyranny. Eisenhower, however, contended that the war could have been avoided by ordinary foresight and prudence. Republicans also charged that Truman's determination not to force North Korean prisoners of war (POWs) to return home unwillingly delayed an armistice agreement and prolonged the unpopular conflict. Stevenson vowed never to force POWs to return to their communist homelands. Eisenhower concurred that no prisoners would be repatriated by force, but he pledged a fair and humane settlement of the POW issue. Eisenhower also said that the South Korean army should be trained and equipped to take the place of U.S. soldiers, a view the public came increasingly to favor during the campaign.

Policy and Performance Issues in 1952

Political scientists distinguish between "policy" and "performance" issues in elections. On policy issues, voters take opposing positions, pro and con, and support the candidate who is closest to their own policy views. On performance issues, most voters share a desired goal and vote for the candidate whom they view as more likely to achieve it.

By November 1952, a narrow majority of voters believed that the United States had made a mistake in going to war in Korea. Most voters wanted an honorable peace, but neither an escalation of the war nor its indefinite continuation. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander who had brought victory in World War II, made his famous declaration on October 24, 1952, "This administration cannot be expected to repair what it failed to prevent," pledging, "I will go to Korea." Eisenhower did not have to tell voters how he might achieve an honorable peace. The public's confidence that Eisenhower would conclude this unpopular war was central to his comfortable victory.

The debate over "who lost China" constituted a second performance judgment aiding Eisenhower. Seventy-five percent of those who blamed the U.S. government for the communist takeover of China voted for Eisenhower, compared with 46 percent of those who did not view U.S. actions as responsible.

Longer-term domestic position issues continued to divide voters along partisan lines. Those who approved of a strong federal role in unemployment, education, and housing supported Stevenson. Those who opposed a strong federal role voted for Eisenhower. Similarly, a strong majority who advocated either the repeal or revision of Taft-Hartley voted for Stevenson, whereas an equally large majority of those who supported Taft-Hartley voted for Eisenhower.

The attractiveness of the two major party candidates, Eisenhower in particular, drew almost 64 percent of the voting-age population to the polls. Voting turnout in 1952 was the highest since the advent of women's suffrage in the 1920 election and 10 percentage points higher than in 1948. Eisenhower handily defeated Stevenson by a margin of 55 percent to 44 percent.

The 1952 and 1954 Congressional Elections

With the surge both in turnout and in support for Eisenhower in 1952, the Republicans gained 22 seats in the House of Representatives, sufficient to wrest control from the Democrats. The Republicans gained only one seat in the Senate, but this was enough to seize control of the Senate as well. Eisenhower's election was more a personal than a party victory, but his coattails proved just long enough to ensure a Republican House and Senate.

In the 1954 midterm elections, Republicans continued to allege that Democrats were indifferent to domestic subversion. Nonetheless, the Democrats gained 19 House seats and one Senate seat. The Republicans would not again control the House of Representatives until the 1994 election.

The Presidential Election of 1956

Omitting those with no opinion, Eisenhower's presidential approval rating began at 91 percent in January 1953 and never fell below 70 percent during his first term. His popularity and his leadership in the foreign crises that would arise during the heat of the 1956 campaign ensured that the election would be fought to his strengths. All of his major campaign speeches concentrated on foreign affairs.

Adlai Stevenson, whom the Democrats again nominated to run against Eisenhower, knew that any effort to appeal to voters on foreign policy would pit his ideas against Eisenhower's greater credi-

bility. Even so, in nearly every speech he spoke of foreign affairs, usually suggesting that the Republicans were losing the Cold War through a policy of drift.

The 1956 campaign debate over the future of Europe and East-West relations was framed by the events leading up to the Geneva Conference in July 1955. Great Britain developed a formula for the Western recognition of West Germany and for the rearming of its military forces, which were incorporated into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Soviets responded with the creation of the Warsaw Pact in early 1955.

Large majorities of Americans favored NATO and its principle of collective security. The percentage stating that the number of U.S. troops stationed in Europe was either "about right" or that "more should be sent" did not fall below 80 percent in any of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveys from November 1953 to December 1956.

In Europe, however, the division of Europe into the two political and military alliances stimulated public support for a summit to reduce East-West tensions. In May 1956, the Soviet delegate to a UN disarmament subcommittee in London presented a comprehensive arms control proposal, which was compatible with Western insistence on large reductions in conventional forces in Europe. In response, the Eisenhower administration developed the idea of *mutual aerial inspection*, known as Open Skies.

The American people approved of the prospect of better relations with the Soviet Union. The public consistently supported summit meetings between Soviet and U.S. leaders, as well as cultural and other exchanges between the two superpowers, even while continuing to favor a strong military presence abroad to assist other countries in limiting Soviet expansion.

Nuclear fallout from atmospheric testing increased as a public concern throughout the mid-1950s. A majority of the public opposed Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's doctrine of *massive retaliation*, the deterrence policy that the United States would respond to a Soviet invasion in Europe with a U.S. nuclear assault on Soviet cities.

Stevenson responded to this concern about nuclear weapons and fallout by proposing a ban on nuclear testing. After conducting three tests in August 1956, Soviet premier Nikolay Bulganin also proposed a test ban. Bulganin then clumsily undercut Stevenson by appearing to endorse a Stevenson victory in the election. In the Gallup October pre-election poll, 70 percent of those who opposed a test ban said they would vote for Eisenhower, whereas 73 percent who supported the suspension of tests supported Stevenson. A clear majority disapproved of a test ban, indicating that Stevenson's proposal cost him votes on this issue.

As one element in a proposal to modernize U.S. armed forces and to create a more professional military, Stevenson also proposed an early end to the military draft. The Republican campaign elevated it into a major campaign issue. In the October Gallup pre-election survey, 63 percent of those who supported the draft said they would vote for Eisenhower, whereas 71 percent who opposed the draft said they would vote for Stevenson. Supporters of the draft outnumbered opponents by more than 4:1.

Two international crises erupted during the 1956 campaign. In December 1955, Secretary Dulles had extended an offer to

Egypt to help finance the Aswan High Dam. President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt concluded substantial arms deals with the Soviet Union and with China, and the United States encouraged Great Britain and France to sell Israel tanks and fighters. Rising tensions between Israel and Egypt led to heavy fighting in the Gaza Strip in April 1956. On July 19, 1956, Dulles abruptly cancelled the U.S. offer to help build the dam. Nasser responded by seizing the Suez Canal and declaring that he would build the dam with canal revenues.

Eisenhower believed that the U.S. public would not support intervention to stop the canal's seizure as long as the Egyptians operated it effectively. The crisis flared out of control on October 29 when Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula, followed by British and French landings at Port Said on November 5, the day before the election. Identifying the United States with anticolonialism, Eisenhower organized international opposition to the British and French invasion. On November 2, an emergency session of the General Assembly adopted a U.S. cease-fire resolution.

Most observers conclude that Stevenson made a difficult political situation worse by criticizing Eisenhower during the crisis. Majorities of voters in the post-election surveys of Gallup and the NORC disapproved of the invasion by Israel, England, and France, and those who disapproved of the invasion voted disproportionately for Eisenhower over Stevenson.

As the Middle East situation deteriorated, rebellion erupted in Eastern Europe as Poles and Hungarians began protests against Soviet domination. The Republicans had stressed their support for liberation of the "captive nations" since 1952, and they included a plank reaffirming Republican support for the "oppressed peoples and nations" of Eastern Europe in the party's 1956 platform.

The unrest in Poland quickly spread to Hungary, where protesters also called for the removal of Soviet troops. Soviet tanks repelled freedom fighters in Budapest armed with rocks and Molotov cocktails, and the last resistance collapsed only two days before the U.S. election. Eisenhower opposed any intervention that would appear to the Soviets to be threatening the Warsaw Pact.

Fortuitously for the administration, the Soviets agreed on October 30 to withdraw troops from Hungary. When the Hungarian government agreed to an armistice for the freedom fighters, the political dangers that the events in Poland and Hungary posed for Eisenhower's reelection largely evaporated. Voters continued to judge the Republicans better able to keep the country out of war by a ratio of more than 5:1.

When a president runs for reelection, people tend to decide their votes by evaluating the president's performance in office, not by comparing the campaign policy promises of the president and his challenger. Though the public preferred the domestic policy positions of the Democratic Party in 1956, they believed that foreign affairs were paramount in importance, and they were confident in Eisenhower's conduct of foreign affairs. President Eisenhower easily won reelection over Stevenson by a margin of 57 percent to 42 percent.

Although Adlai Stevenson shared Eisenhower's commitments in East-West relations, he did propose curtailing H-bomb tests and suspending compulsory military service, both of which Eisenhower and the larger public opposed.

Table 1 Popular and Electoral Votes for President, 1940–1956

	Major Party Candidates		*Electoral Vote (number and percent)*		*Popular Vote (number and percent)*		
Year	*Democrat*	*Republican*	*Democrat*	*Republican*	*Democrat*	*Republican*	*Other*
1940	Franklin D. Roosevelt Henry A. Wallace	Wendell Willkie Charles McNary	449 85%	82 15%	27,263,448 54.7%	22,336,260 44.8%	238,991 0.5%
1944	Franklin D. Roosevelt Harry S. Truman	Thomas E. Dewey John W. Bricker	432 81%	99 19%	25,611,936 53.4%	22,013,372 45.9%	349,879 0.7%
1948	Harry S. Truman Alben W. Barkley	Thomas E. Dewey Earl Warren	303 57%	189 36%	24,105,587 49.5%	21,970,017 45.1%	2,615,620 5.4%
1952	Adlai E. Stevenson John Sparkman	Dwight D. Eisenhower Richard M. Nixon	89 17%	442 83%	27,314,649 44.4%	33,936,137 55.1%	457,981 0.7%
1956	Adlai E. Stevenson Estes Kefauver	Dwight D. Eisenhower Richard M. Nixon	73 14%	457 86%	26,030,172 42.0%	35,585,245 57.4%	413,684 0.7%

Source: Vital Statistics on American Politics, Tables 1–7, and *Congressional Quarterly's Guide to U.S. Elections.*

Table 2 House and Senate Election Results, by Congress, 1942–1958

		House					Senate					
					Gains/losses					Gains/losses		
Year	*Congress*	*Dem.*	*Rep.*	*Other*	*Dem.*	*Rep.*	*Dem.*	*Rep.*	*Other*	*Dem.*	*Rep.*	*President*
1942	78th	222	209	4	–45	47	57	38	1	–9	10	
1944	79th	243	190	2	21	–19	57	38	1	0	0	Roosevelt (D)
1946	80th	188	246	1	–55	56	45	51		–12	13	Truman (D)
1948	81st	263	171	1	75	–75	54	42		9	–9	Truman (D)
1950	82nd	234	199	2	–29	28	48	47	1	–6	5	
1952	83rd	213	221	1	–21	22	47	48	1	–1	1	Eisenhower (R)
1954	84th	232	203		19	–18	48	47	1	1	–1	
1956	85th	234	201		2	–2	49	47		1	0	Eisenhower (R)
1958	86th	283	154		49	–47	64	34		17	–13	

Note: Because of changes in the overall number of seats in the Senate and House, in the number of seats won by third parties, and in the number of vacancies, a Republican loss is not always matched precisely by a Democratic gain, or vice versa. Gains/losses reflect pre-election/post-election changes. Deaths, resignations, and special elections can cause further changes in party makeup.

Source: Vital Statistics on American Politics, Tables 1–18.

Table 3 Vote

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1944	5
1948	5
1952	6
1956	6

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Table 3 Voter Turnout Rates: Overall, South, and Non-South, 1940–1958 (percent)

Presidential Election Years				*Nonpresidential Election Years*			
Year	*Overall*	*Non-South*	*South*	*Year*	*Overall*	*Non-South*	*South*
1940	62.4	72.9	26.1	1942	33.9	42.0	6.9
1944	55.9	65.1	24.5	1946	38.8	47.2	10.4
1948	53.3	61.8	24.5	1950	42.6	51.6	12.4
1952	63.8	71.4	38.4	1954	43.1	51.3	16.1
1956	61.6	69.2	36.6	1958	44.5	53.5	15.2

Note: These turnout figures represent the percentage of the electorate of voting age casting valid (officially tabulated) votes in presidential elections and, in nonpresidential election years, elections to the U.S. House of Representatives. The base is the citizen voting-age population. The number of people actually going to the polls is slightly higher than these percentages indicate; some voters do not vote for a given office such as president or U.S. House, and a small number of ballots are spoiled. Also, some persons of voting age were not legally eligible to vote in their states. This number was particularly high in many southern states in this period because these states actively discouraged or prevented African Americans from registering to vote.

Source: Vital Statistics on American Politics, Table 1-1.

These two policy issues, in conjunction with the crises in Suez and Hungary in the last two weeks of the campaign, added to Eisenhower's landslide reelection.

Eisenhower's victory was more personal than partisan, and his coattails were nonexistent. The Republicans lost two seats to the Democrats in the House and one seat in the Senate. Turnout continued to be high by U.S. standards, as 62 percent of the voting-age population went to the polls.

The Congressional Elections of 1958

Americans made a second kind of performance judgment in 1958, this time on the performance of the economy. In fall 1957, the United States entered the second recession of Eisenhower's two administrations. Since the Depression of the 1930s, voters had judged the Democratic Party to be the better guardian of prosperity. The Democrats gained 49 House seats and 13 Senate seats, leaving the Democrats with large majorities in both chambers. More than any other during the 1950s, the election of 1958 turned on the performance of the economy.

Richard W. Boyd

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Cold War Elections: 1960–1976

1960 Election

President Dwight D. Eisenhower was prohibited from running for a third term in 1960 because of the recently adopted Twenty-Second Amendment. The Republicans easily nominated Eisenhower's vice president, Richard Milhous Nixon, with running mate Henry Cabot Lodge Jr., a U.S. senator from Massachusetts, to run in what proved to be one of the closest elections in history. The Democrats' nomination was more hotly contested, and a forty-three-year-old senator from Massachusetts, John Fitzgerald Kennedy,

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