

A History of Presidential Elections

From the Ascent of Washington to the Rise of Trump, 1789-2016

A Rough Course Schedule (and Reading List):

Lecture 1: 1789-1812 (Susan Dunn, *Jefferson's Second Revolution: Election of 1800*)

Lecture 2: 1812-1840 (Donald Ratcliffe, *One Party Presidential Contest, 1824*)

Lecture 3: 1840-1865 (Ecelbarger, *Great Comeback: How Lincoln Beat the Odds*)

Lecture 4: 1865-1901 (John Waugh, *Reelecting Lincoln, 1864*)

Lecture 5: 1901-1932 (James Chace, *1912*)

Lecture 6: 1932-1945 (Steve Neal, *Happy Days Are Here Again*)

Lecture 7: 1945-1968 (Zach Karabell, *Last Campaign: How Truman Won*)

Lecture 8: 1968-today (Lewis Gould, *1968: The Election that Changed America*)

The Most Consequential Presidential Elections:

1. 1860: First Republican elected with only 40 percent of the popular vote; the Union fractures after a dramatic four-way contest featuring spoiler candidates, igniting four-year Civil War; emergence of Lincoln. *Partial realignment election.*
2. 1800: Federalists defeated; close and passion-stirring election with uncertain outcome; Jefferson elected; 1st party change-over; peaceful transition; Aaron Burr controversy exposes electoral college flaws and provokes Constitutional amendment; *realignment election.*
3. 1844: First dark horse nomination (Polk); first surprise outcome (Polk over more prominent Henry Clay); Clay defeated for third time; spoiler candidate (Liberty Party) determines election, outcome leads to war with Mexico in 1846.
4. 1932: In midst of Great Depression; dramatic Democratic convention and nomination; New Deal proposed; landslide/*realignment election.*
5. 1864: Wartime election; enormous stakes and consequences; Lincoln anticipates defeat but defeats peace candidate McClellan by a comfortable margin; *partial realignment election.*
6. 1824: Fracturing of old system; death of caucus selection tradition; unprecedented four-way contest exposes Electoral College problems; House controversially decides winner; popular vote-winner (Jackson) denied; accusations of "corrupt bargain" plague victor, John Quincy Adams. End of first party system. *Partial Realignment election.*
7. 1828: Jackson avenges 1824; ushering in new era of populist politics; first Democratic victory; landslide/*realignment election.*
8. 1912: Only three-way race among three former or future presidents; stirring Bull Moose crusade; strongest third-party showing in history; spoiler factor with Progressive party garnering 27 percent and Democrats winning for first time since 1892 with only 42 percent of popular vote.
9. 1940: Two dramatic conventions; unprecedented third-term nomination and election; stirring wartime election; military draft introduced in midst of campaign; two gifted, popular candidates (FDR and Willkie).
10. 1876: 115 days of stalemate and uncertainty follow election; compromise reached two days before inauguration of "Rutherford" B. Hayes; stolen election leads to end of postwar Reconstruction.

11. 1968: Race and Vietnam fracture New Deal coalition in dramatic year (assassinations, Chicago convention, etc.); Nixon elected after close popular vote (less than one percent) with only 43 percent in three-way contest; quasi-*realignment*; “Southern Strategy.”
12. 1789: First “election” unanimously selects George Washington.
13. 1896: Thrilling “Cross of Gold” speech sparks dynamic Bryan crusade and Populist insurgency; money in politics becomes an issue. *Realignment confirming* election.
14. 1856: Dramatic three-way contest; first-ever Republican campaign reveals surprising strength, as does support for the “Know-Nothing” Party; James Buchanan takes office as union appears to be fracturing. Beginning of third party system; embryonic realigning election.
15. 1916: Close, gripping contest, Wilson narrowly reelected; wartime election; consequences for war and peace.
16. 1848: Exciting three-way contest; Democrats fracture; Whigs triumph for only second time; “Free-soil” crusade anticipates 1860 fracture; another spoiler candidate throws election.
17. 1840: In the unprecedentedly stirring “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too” campaign, Whigs win first-ever election in routing Jacksonian Democrats in the midst of economic depression; victor dies thirty days after inaugural, vice president assumes office for first time.
18. 1796: Succession to George Washington pits Adams against Jefferson in the first contested election.
19. 2008: First African-American elected amid financial collapse and two overseas wars.
20. 1980: Reagan victory launches period of conservative ideology, supply-side economics and tax policy.
21. 1948: Iconic “Dewey Beats Truman” upset; New Deal coalition pulls out unexpected win despite two potential spoilers, Henry Wallace and Strom Thurmond.
22. 2000: Close election featuring spoiler third-party candidate; Florida election chaos; interference by candidate’s brother; unprecedented SCOTUS intervention; controversial outcome and enormous consequences for economic and foreign policy.
23. 1920: Harding’s landslide victory begins decade of Republican dominance, conservative governance and economic policy.
24. 1952: First Democratic defeat in quarter-century brings Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower to the White House and elevates Richard Nixon to national prominence.
25. 1884: The sensational “Rum, Romanism, Rebellion” contest; spoiler candidate determines outcome in close, surprising result; first Democrat (Cleveland) elected since 1856.