Chapter 4

Truman's Grandview Farming and Political Success

Introduction

Farming and Politics

Truman as County Judge, 1924 - 1926 1928 - 1934

Truman as U.S. Senator, 1935 - 1945

Truman as Vice-President, 1945

Truman Becomes President, 1945 - 1948

Truman's 1948 Presidential Campaign

Introduction

The years Harry Truman spent on the Grandview farm, without doubt, had an effect on him. Any life experience lasting eleven years obviously would. However, did that farming experience somehow bathe him in a light more favorably perceived by the electorate? Did the voters elect Harry Truman because they perceived him as a farmer? Or, did the farming experience have a subtler, more complex causal relationship with his political success? These are the questions addressed in this chapter.

A brief overview history of Harry Truman's political career, commencing with his years on the Jackson County Court and culminating with his ascension and later election to the Presidency is presented followed by an examination of what factors influenced his career, including the role played by his time behind the plow.

Farming and Politics

A significant question is what effect, if any, Truman's Grandview farming experience had on both his political success and his political policies. All too frequently, the answer is based upon assumptions that are not substantiated by either the statistical evidence or common sense. The popular assumption is that the people elected a farmer. But by the time he beat Dewey in the 1948 presidential election, Truman had been a politician twice as long as he had farmed. He was a First World War veteran, a Mason, a former county judge, a former United States senator, and a Vice President. Was he still perceived as a farmer anyway? Perhaps it was not being a farmer as much as possessing "Common Man" attributes that got the votes to put him in the White House. Could Truman have come from any other "Common Man" background and still been perceived in the same way by the electorate? The answer must be somewhere in his political history. However, before examining the Truman specifics, some broad, contextual background, and some knowledge of the politics of Missouri farming in the early 1900s might be helpful.

The political force exerted by United States farmers has been sporadic at best. For example, between 1873 and 1875 there were approximately 3,000 local lodges of the Patrons of Husbandry or Grange organized in Missouri. The organization declined in membership until about 1890 when participation increased making it an important political force in the state at

least up until the early 1920s. Both the Farmers' Alliance, organized in 1872 and the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union, organized in 1902, were important social and economic organizations; however, both were short-lived. The most important single organization which held sway within the Missouri farming community prior to Truman's launch into politics was a state organization known as the Missouri Farmers' Association which engendered a large number of affiliated local organizations known as County Farm Bureaus. Originally created as an avenue for the then College of Agriculture to promote "progressive farming techniques," the Missouri Farmers' Association blossomed during the First World War when the federal government perceived the Association as an organization through which it could advocate increased agricultural production during the war. Following the war, County Farm Bureaus continued to cooperate with local agricultural colleges and universities as well as the United States Department of Agriculture to promote new farming techniques and to disseminate educational information. By 1921 the average per-county membership of County Farm Bureaus was 800 members. However, County Farm Bureaus were much more important as an educational forum and a social focus than they were as a political force.[137]

Truman: County Judge, 1924 - 1926, 1928 - 1934

Harry Truman's first campaign was launched in 1922. He ran for the position of County Judge, an administrative job that would be most closely analogous to today's county commissioner. The position paid $3,465 a year and the term was two years. The timing could not have been better for Truman. His haberdashery had failed, largely due to the then-prevailing economic climate, and he needed a job. "Went into business all enthusiastic. Lost all I had and all I could borrow. Mike Pendergast picked me up and put me into politics and I've been lucky," Truman would write later.[138] During an interview with Merle Miller years later when Miller was conducting research for his book *Plain Speaking*, Truman was even more to the point:

> Miller: It seems odd, feeling as you do, that you didn't want to get into politics.

---

[137] N. F. B. Mumford, "A Century of Missouri Agriculture," *The Missouri Historical Review*, XV (October 1920 - July 1921), 294-96.
[138] McCullough, *Truman*, 160.

> Truman: Well, I never did. I got into politics by accident. In 1922 I had gone broke trying to run a haberdashery store, and I had to have a job. And I had a lot of good friends in Jackson County and was kin to everybody else, and so I ran for eastern judge, one of five, and I licked all of the rest of them because I knew more people in the county than they did. That's all.[139]

Truman's campaign for County Judge was launched on March 8, 1922, at the War Veterans Auditorium at Lee's Summit. Three hundred people attended. It is important to note that Truman did not identify himself as a farmer running for office, but as a veteran running for office. He was presented as the American Legion candidate. He won the election and in a formal ceremony at the Independence courthouse on New Year's Day, 1923, he was inaugurated. [140]

Two years later, in 1926, Truman again ran for county judge and was defeated by Henry Rummel, an Independence harnessmaker. For the next two years Harry sold memberships in the Kansas City Automobile Club on commission. His commission was five dollars for every new member. He cleared $5,000. Harry also joined with Colonel Stayton, Spencer Salisbury and others, and took over the Citizens Security Bank in Englewood, a town near Independence. Discovering that they had been misled about the existence of assets, the partners sold their interest, making no money on the transaction.[141]

In 1926, with the support of the Pendergast political organization, Truman ran for and was elected presiding county judge. He served two consecutive four-year terms, from January 1927 to January 1935. During those eight years, Truman became known as a public servant who was sincerely concerned about providing taxpayers with the full benefit of their tax dollars. He passed up the 6 percent interest being offered by Kansas City banks and went to Chicago where he secured 4 and later 2 ½ percent interest loans; he built good roads at reasonable prices as the result of awarding contracts to the lowest qualified bidders; and he made himself available to his constituency.[142]

---

[139] Merle Miller, *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S Truman* (New York: Berkley Publishing Co., 1973), 64.
[140] Ibid., 161.
[141] Ibid., 69.
[142] McCullough, *Truman*, 173-92.

Truman as United States Senator

Truman's first venture into national politics was in 1934-35 when, as a middle-aged man, he ran for the U.S. Senate. His senatorial campaign was conducted during a time of profound nationwide economic hardship. Farm prices had been in a constant decline since the Coolidge years. Eggs that once sold for 25 cents a dozen were being sold for a nickel. Since 1930 more than eighteen thousand Missouri farms had been foreclosed. The rural Missouri landscape was dominated by abandoned houses with boarded windows, overgrown front yards, and toppling fences. Sharecroppers lived in two-room, dirt-floor shacks; newspapers insulated the walls. The heat of the sun conspired with drought and wind, heralding in the dust bowl. A *Kansas City Star* editorial described the agrarian tragedy: "Under merciless summer suns the fields arched, and the corn withered, and the cattle perished, and the rivers became as scars of dust, as the drought droned its hymn of hate."[143]

James P. Aylward, Truman's 1934 campaign manager stressed Truman's service as an Army officer, an active member of the American Legion, and as county judge. However, when speaking, Truman frequently stressed his thesis that, "what was good for the farmer was good for the county." He attacked both his opponents for their failure to support the Frazier-Lemke Farm Loan Bill and he accused both of failing to champion legislation designed to increase farm prices. Pro-farm statements not only endeared him to farmers but to the rural population generally.[144] In fact a May 31, 1934 *Independence Examiner* editorial endorsing Truman for the Senate focused primarily on his rural roots and not his farming background. In its lead sentence, the editorial drew the urban-versus-rural distinction: "Missouri this year has an opportunity to get away from the two large cites and elect a country boy to the United States Senate."[145]

Truman also focused his speeches on his advocacy of New Deal legislation. He carefully researched his two opponent's congressional record and pointed out each time they had deviated from Roosevelt's programs. One scholar concluded that, "Truman's success [in the 1934 primary] lay in the fact that he emerged from the rural and urban areas with a majority because he appealed to a more diverse voting populace."[146]

Truman presented himself as a simple country boy offering the electorate a common-sense approach to public office.

---

[143] Kansas City *Star*, 31 July 1934.
[144] James T. Crenshaw, "Harry S. Truman: A Study of the Missouri Democratic Senatorial Primary Races of 1934 and 1940," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, August 1976.
[145] *The Independence Examiner*, 31 May 1934.
[146] Crenshaw, "Harry S. Truman," 109.

He portrayed himself as a good Baptist farmer from Grandview, poking fun at his "city farmer" rivals. Interestingly, the Missouri Farmers' Association opposed Truman's during the campaign. William Hirth, the association's president characterized Truman as a Pendergast bellhop.

> For this bellhop of Pendergast's to aspire to make a jump from the obscure bench of a county judge to the United States Senate is without precedent. When one contemplates the giants of the past who have represented Missouri this spectacle is not only grotesque, it is sheer buffoonery.[147]

During the campaign, Truman appeared in more than fifty Missouri county seats (more than half of the 114) to stand on the courthouse steps and address what was usually a small crowd comprised of school children and the unemployed lounging on the courthouse lawn.[148]

The general economic climate of 1934 was certainly conducive to the electorate being receptive to a candidate who knew struggle and suffering. The United States was still dazed from the Great Depression. Farm prices had fallen to one-fifth of what they had been prior to and during World War I. One-third of farm families nation-wide had been forced to go on relief. In Missouri approximately 18,000 farms were seized through foreclosure between 1930 and 1934. Truman's support of legislation such as the Soil Conservation Act, federal farm loans, subsidization of farm interest rates, and the Agricultural Adjustment Acts made him popular with American farmers in the 1934 election and his continued support paid political benefits when he ran again in 1940, and in his 1948 bid for president. In fact the foreclosure proceedings against the Grandview farm may have worked to his advantage. Millions of voters could deeply empathize with Truman's embarrassment.[149]

Truman won the primaries by a narrow margin with 276,850 votes. Cochran received 236,105, and Milligan 147,614.[150]

Truman's success against these two candidates, both of whom had national experience, has been attributed by some writers to a large rural support that resulted from his wide exposure throughout Missouri as a Mason, and as president of the Missouri County Judge Association. The Judge's Association

---

[147] Kansas City *Star* , 29 July 1934.
[148] McCullough, *Truman*, 211.
[149] Crenshaw, "Harry S. Truman,"155.
[150] Richard Kirkendall, ed., *The Harry S Truman Encyclopedia* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co, 1989), 72.

was reportedly one of the most powerful political forces in the state. Additionally, Truman's participation in veterans' organizations and in the Baptist church has been identified as factors. Ironically, Truman's failure as a businessman may have been a political asset since many voters who were struggling against the same fate could identify with him.[151] Truman enjoyed an overwhelming victory in the general election perhaps as a result of Roosevelt's popularity.

It is interesting to note that the summer of 1935 when Truman went to Washington as a freshman senator, his world included the worst of the Dust Bowl in the nation's midlands, Will Rogers dying in a plane crash in Alaska, and Senator Harry Truman, one of the most financially impoverished Senators receiving a salary of $10,000 per year. In letters to Bess he reported his bus fare as 20 cents, a six-month subscription to the Washington Post as $7.50, and he expressed guilt for extravagantly buying a bathing suit and going to the Maryland seashore for the Fourth of July.[152]

If the 1934 election fails to reveal a causal link between Truman's Grandview farming experience and his political success beyond giving rise to his perception as a common man, the 1940 election is even less helpful. On February 3, 1940, Harry Truman announced formally that he was running for reelection to the United States Senate. He borrowed a room in the Ambassador Building in St. Louis, he borrowed furniture, and on occasion had difficulty raising enough money for postage. One mailing soliciting contributions was mailed to eight hundred addressees; the mailing produced $200. At one point during the campaign, there was not enough money for a motel, and Harry slept in his 1938 Dodge.[153] But Truman was not left alone. Fellow Democrats from the Senate traveled to Missouri to help. Carl Hatch, Sherman Minton and Lewis Schwellenbach were vocal in their support. Senator Jimmy Byrnes prevailed upon Bernard Baruch, a New York financier, who contributed $4,000 to the campaign. A. F. Whitney, the president of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, ran a full-page newspaper ad soliciting support for Truman, and the railroad unions gave $17,000 to the cause. Notwithstanding these contributions, Harry still had to borrow $3,000 against his life insurance policy.

Truman campaigned on his record in the senate where his four years of investigations into railroad finances had culminated in the Truman-Wheeler Bill providing protection for the railroads. He had supported the Farm Tenancy Act of 1937, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938, farm price supports, low-cost housing,

---

[151] Ibid. 79.
[152] Ferrell, ed., *Letters to Bess*, 367.
[153] McCullough, *Truman*, 245.

increased funds for public works, increased federal contributions to old-age pensions, and the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938.[154] Also notable was his stand on civil rights, which was daringly radical for 1940 America. In a Sedalia speech before an all-white audience, he said:

> I believe in the brotherhood of man; not merely the brotherhood of white men, but the brotherhood of all men before the law. If any class or race can be permanently set apart from, or pushed down below the rest in political and civil rights, so may any other class or race when it shall incur the displeasure of its more powerful associates, and we may say farewell to the principles on which we count our safety.
>
> Negroes have been preyed upon by all types of exploiters, from the installment salesman of clothing, pianos, and furniture to the vendors of vice. The majority of our Negro people find but cold comfort in shanties and tenements. Surely, as freemen, they are entitled to something better than this.[155]

Governor Lloyd C. Stark and Maurice Milligan opposed Truman on the Democratic ticket in the primaries. Stark had been instrumental in the prosecution and incarceration of Tom Pendergast in 1939, which endeared him to anti-Pendergast voters. However, his ego combined with his obvious political ambitions (manifested by his attempts to run for president, vice president and seek appointments as Secretary of the Navy and governor-general of the Philippines), alienated many Missouri voters.[156] Bennet Clark, who finally concluded he would support Truman commented on Lloyd Stark's political ambitions to a St Louis Post-Dispatch reporter:

> Lloyd's ambitions seem to be like the gentle dew that falls from heaven and covers everything high or low. He is the first man in the history of the United States who has ever tried to run for President and Vice-President, Secretary of the Navy, Secretary of War, Governor General of the Philippines, Ambassador to England and United States Senator all at one and the same time . . . I understand, too, that he is receiving favorable mention as Akhund of Swat and Emir of Afghanistan.[157]

---

[154] Ibid., 246.
[155] McCullough, *Truman*, 247.
[156] Kirkendall, *The Harry S Truman Encyclopedia*, 87.
[157] McCullough, *Truman*, 249.

On July 15, 1940, Truman was in attendance when the Democratic convention opened in Chicago. He had a position on the Resolutions Committee. The following day, July 16, 1940, an event transpired back home in Missouri that emotionally affected him as much as any event he had experienced up to that time or would deal with in his future. The Grandview farm was foreclosed, forcing his sister and his eighty-seven-year-old mother to pack their belongings and move off the family homestead. The *Kansas City Star* featured it on page one, complete with pictures. The caption of the newspaper's photograph identified the farm as that belonging to Martha E. Truman, the mother of the Missouri senator. Truman would believe for the rest of his life that both the foreclosure and its timing were for political purposes and designed to humiliate him in the middle of his campaign.

Although Truman won the primary, it would be equally accurate to say that Stark's mistakes, and the fact that Milligan and Stark divided the anti-Pendergast vote got Truman elected. Truman won by only 8,000 votes. Truman was a strong supporter of Roosevelt in the general election. Both Roosevelt and Truman won in the general election by a narrow margin.

Truman's second term as Missouri senator became most distinguished by his leadership of the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, known from its inception as the Truman Committee. Created in the Spring of 1941 at Truman's instigation, the Truman Committee, comprised of seven bipartisan members, was charged with investigating what Truman believed was the scandalously wasteful state of military spending (even before the United State's direct military involvement in World War II). In only a few months, the Truman Committee proved its value in both results and attention. Under Truman's straightforward, intelligent, and eminently fair leadership, the committee uncovered millions of dollars wasted in federal military expenditures. His highly praised chairmanship of the committee thrust Truman into the national spotlight and, ultimately, made him a contender for the 1944 vice-presidential nomination on Franklin Roosevelt's ticket.[158]

Truman as Vice-President

In 1944 Harry Truman was selected to run as vice president on President Roosevelt's ticket. Truman's name as a possible vice-presidential candidate surfaced initially during a meeting at the White House in January of 1944, six months before the national convention. Alternative choices considered at that meeting included Jimmy Byrnes, Alben Barkley, and Justice

[158] Ibid., 256-70.

William O. Douglas. Truman knew nothing of the meeting, or anything of his being considered. In his opinion Sam Rayburn would be the best nominee for the vice-presidency. Roosevelt's health had quietly become an issue. In April of 1944, after suffering what was publicly reported as "walking pneumonia," Roosevelt went to South Carolina for a two-week vacation and stayed a month. Ed Flynn, a New York national committeeman and White House confidant, seeing the President after his return from South Carolina asked Mrs. Roosevelt to persuade President Roosevelt to not run. "I felt," Flynn later said, "that he would never survive his term."[159] Flynn's observations were well founded. President Roosevelt had secretly been under the supervision of a cardiologist who reported in March that given proper care the President might live a year.[160]

During the Chicago Democratic National Convention in the summer of 1944, several names were mentioned as possible vice presidential candidates. Harry Truman was the choice of Roosevelt as well as Ed Flynn. And, it was a very reluctant Harry Truman who ran as the candidate.

Truman Becomes President

Truman was Vice President for eighty-two days before he was catapulted in the presidency by Roosevelt's death on April 12, 1945. Truman accepted the office with deep reservations.

During Truman's first weeks in office in 1945, he had so alienated J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI that Hoover would later provide Dewey with as much information as he could throughout the 1948 campaign. Shortly after assuming the office of president, transcripts of telephone conversations the FBI had surreptitiously intercepted were delivered to Truman. It had been Roosevelt's custom to encourage Hoover's surveillance of opposing political figures. The tapes delivered to Truman pertained to the activities of the wife of a White House aide. Truman was reportedly offended by the FBI's conduct, and refused to review the documents. President Truman would later write in his diary after only one month as President,

> We want no Gestapo or Secret Police. FBI is tending in that direction. They are dabbling in sex-life scandals and plain blackmail when they should be catching criminals.

[159] George E. Allen, *Presidents Who Have Known Me* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), 179.
[160] Jim Bishop, *FDR's Last Year: April 1944-April 1945* (New York: William Morrow, 1974), 94.

> They also have a habit of sneering at local law enforcement officers. This must stop. Cooperation is what we must have.[161]

Truman's 1948 Campaign

It is the 1948 presidential campaign that provides at least a partial answer to the question of the significance of the Grandview farm to Truman's political success. This time it was Truman himself against Dewey. And, from the beginning it was an up-hill fight for Truman. Dewey presented a persona of a confident, barb-witted public speaker. Some political analysts, however, contend that Dewey may have appeared overly confident to the point of being perceived as arrogant.

In the senate Truman had continued to build a reputation as the common man's champion dedicated to the elimination of privilege derived from the concentration of wealth. As chair of what would later be known as the Truman Committee, he pursued corruption in defense contracting. He found it, and he publicly exposed it. In so doing he gave the electorate two messages: first, the voters could not trust the powerful privileged within the industrial machines, and, second, that Truman continued to be the relentless advocate of Every Man. It certainly didn't hurt that as a Missouri farmer in the Senate his assaults against the gated walls of privilege could only be perceived as Goliath being pummeled by David in a straw hat.[162]

The defense industry was not the only Goliath Truman assailed as hero of the common man and as Missouri farmer in Washington. The Polls were not favoring Truman in the spring of 1948. So, on July 25th, 1948, Truman reconvened the Republican congress, admonished their failure to address the plight of the average citizen and challenged them to do something positive. Recalling Congress into a special session after adjournment probably provided Truman with some additional political hay. Convening a special session is a presidential power that had been only rarely used by presidents, and would, therefore, most certainly receive wide press coverage.

Truman also appeared before an estimated six million people during his thirty-one thousand-mile "whistle stop" campaign. He appealed to the "common man" with his verbal attacks on big business and GOP anti-union legislation, including the Taft-Hartley Act. Truman also advocated farm price supports

---

[161] Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off The Record*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 22.
[162] Paul C. Nagel, *Missouri: A Bicentennial History*, (NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977).

making him attractive to farmers who were getting less for their products.[163]

Following the serious economic woes of farmers, and the resulting slump in the national economy after World War I, there developed a wide-spread belief that what was good for the farmer was good for the country. A belief that depressions were "farm led and farm fed." The consequential corollary was that the United States could maintain a healthy economy by ensuring the agricultural sector remained healthy. This commonly held belief translated into the Agricultural Adjustment Acts of the 1930s receiving broad support. Another manifestation of the general belief that national economic wellbeing depended upon the wellbeing of the agricultural sector was the formation of the concept of parity.

Price parity was introduced under the Roosevelt administration. The basic concept of parity was that the ratio between the prices received for agricultural commodities and the prices farmers were forced to pay for the products they needed would be maintained at levels designed to ensure the farmers' economic survival. This New Deal farm program continued through the Second World War. The only primary change during the war was that the Secretary of Agriculture's discretion to set parity rates was diminished. Prior to the war the Secretary had the authority to determine the specific level for any commodity based upon supplies and anticipated demand. The war, however, necessitated a massive expansion of farm production; guaranteed high parity rates were designed to accomplish that goal. And, they did. The wartime congress set guaranteed supports at higher levels and extended coverage to include more commodities, and farm production increased.

Postwar economics would not be able to maintain those high rates, and it was generally understood that the rates had to be lowered. Unfortunately, according to at least one historian, the congressional establishment of guaranteed rates opened a Pandora's box by focusing attention on the level of the price supports rather than either the method of establishing rates, or even the viability of the concept itself.[164] Ensuing debates most commonly were waged between proponents of a mandatory or fixed level of price supports and those who favored a flexible system.

Legislation in place during the war provided that war-level price supports would remain in effect for a period of two years after the end of the war. On December 31, 1946, Truman officially terminated hostilities meaning that price supports would

[163] Kirkendall, *The Harry S. Truman Encyclopedia*, 87.
[164] Virgil W. Dean, "Farm Policy and Truman's 1948 Campaign," *The Historian* 55: 3 (Spring 1993).

end in the latter part of 1948. Congress started dealing with the issue in 1947, but was unable to arrive at a resolution. It was left for the 1948 session.

Truman was arguing for the enactment of a flexible price-support system, and the Senate, with the urging of Secretary of Agriculture Anderson, enacted legislation that embodied a flexible system. However, the House of Representatives was unwilling to abandon the high World War II levels. Truman used that reluctance to launch his presidential campaign. On May 14th he sent congress a special message on agriculture. The message credited Democratic legislation with the farm prosperity following World War II. He wrote that in his opinion there was no reason to, "overturn this sound legislative base," and he urged Congress to implement improvements in the existing program. He urged Congress to enact a permanent system of flexible price supports.[165]

On June 19th, Congress passed the Agricultural Act of 1948 (also known as the Hope-Aiken Act); Truman voiced strong disapproval of the legislation as it had finally been passed, but nevertheless he signed the act into law on July 3rd. Truman was concerned that Congress had not implemented an effective long-range policy. Throughout his campaign Truman focused on what the Congress had not done, ignoring its accomplishments. "In the field of agriculture, as in so many others, most of the business of the 80th Congress was left unfinished," he said.[166] Truman intensified his campaign by calling Congress back into session on July 26th.

Throughout his 1948 campaign Truman aggressively sought both the farm vote and the vote of labor. He argued repeatedly during campaign speeches that the Republican Party was a party dedicated to advancing only the welfare of the privileged, and was doing its best to split the labor and farm vote. Only by the two factions sticking together and voting Democratic, Truman argued, could the welfare of the general populace be maintained.

A commonly held, but simplistic, misleading assumption held by observers in 1948 and 1949 that has been perpetuated by some historians since then is that there is a direct correlation between what Truman did or said during the campaign and the election results. For example, John A. Kennedy, a longtime personal friend of Harry Truman who owned and published a San Diego newspaper during the 1948 election, and on several occasions traveled with the president on campaign tours in 1948, concluded that a primary factor in Truman's election was that the 80th Congress had alienated the American farmer, and the farmer

[165] Ibid., 506.
[166] Ibid., 507.

perceived Truman as being an adversary of that "do-nothing" Congress. . ."[F]armers were very mad and they voted that way," said Kennedy during an interview in 1974.[167] Similarly, Louis H. Bean, an economist with the Department of Agriculture for thirty years whose last post was as part of the staff of Secretary of Agriculture Anderson in 1947, concluded that, "Truman would have lost the election, except for the support that came to him from the farm belt."[168] Bean continued, saying:

> Sometimes I say that what elected Truman was the weather. The good crop conditions of the summer of '48 produced those bumper crops of cotton and wheat, grains in general, at a time when the farmers were demanding more storage facilities and didn't get them. [Congress had failed to enact requested legislation which would have increased the number of grain storage facilities nationwide.] And, as a result of that, you had the pressure of these large supplies on prices, so that prices were sagging or went down during the campaign. That interesting economic complex, large crops, low prices, inadequate storage facilities, and a candidate [Dewey] saying in part, or interpreted to have said, he favored only sixty percent of parity, I think that seems like a reasonable explanation of why you had this nationwide rural pickup for Truman.

Even Dewey was reportedly convinced that the farm vote he lost in the 1948 election was in large part responsible for his not being elected.[169] But, he was probably wrong, as were contemporary and subsequent reporters. These reporters are basing their conclusion that the farm vote won Truman the election on several assumptions without evidence to support those assumptions. First, they are assuming that the contents of Truman's speeches were heard by the majority of the electorate; second, they are assuming that the messages contained in the speeches were persuasive; third, they are dividing the electorate into overly simplistic demographic categories (farmer vs. non-farmer); and, fourth, these reporters are assuming, without evidence, that the electorate also was aware and responded to some very complex political and legislative maneuvering in Washington, D.C. Translated into useable form, the assumptions are that the average farmer spent time studying the local newspaper, and that the local newspaper reported *in toto*, and

[167] John A. Kennedy interview by James R. Fuchs, transcript of taped interview, Harry S. Truman Library, 13 April, 1974.
[168] Louis H. Bean interview by Jerry N. Hess, transcript of taped interview, Harry S. Truman Library, 11 September, 1970.
[169] Dean, "Farm Policy and Truman's 1948 Campaign, 509.

accurately what Truman said, what Dewey said, and what the Congress did or did not do.

The more logical, objective (and therefore informative) approach to the question of who and what elected Harry Truman to the presidency is to start at the other end. Although the glamour of highly placed public officials is very seductive to historians, the analysis should more logically focus on the voters. Who were they? How did they vote? Why did they vote as they did? And how did the voting break down demographically?

In 1952, the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor reported the results of research they had conducted of the 1948 election. Their methods involved face-to-face interviews of voters in October and follow-up interviews of the same people shortly after they had voted. Their sample was unfortunately small (622 interviewees); however, their sampling was statistically random providing as accurate a cross-section as was possible at that time. And the queries posed to the members of their sample population were sufficiently objective to maximize the possibility of statistical accuracy.[170]

Some of the results of the 1952 University of Michigan study are not surprising: Democratic voters came mainly from the socio-economic groups associated with "the common man," the Republican voters came mainly from the more advantaged groups. A larger percentage of voters voted in metropolitan areas[171] (eight out of ten); six out of ten reported voting in urban areas, and only four out of ten voters voted in rural areas. The study noted that comments made by non-voters in their survey suggested that people in the less populated areas heard less about the campaigns and perhaps felt less involved in the outcome. Significantly, the study concludes that Truman's margin over Dewey at election time was won in the metropolitan and rural areas. A study of some of the demographics and percentages developed by the study is very enlightening. Presented below is a table that synthesizes some of the study results. Columns labeled "Intended" list the percentages of persons who expressed an intent to vote when interviewed in October. [172]

---

[170] Angus Campbell and Robert L. Kahn with Sylvia Eberhart, "The People Elect A President," typescript, Survey Research Center, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, 1952.

[171] For purposes of this study, "metropolitan" means urban areas having populations equal to or greater than one million; "urban" denotes towns and cities having populations less than one million.

[172] Campbell and Kahn, "The People Elect A President," 22.

POPULATION CLASSIFICATION					
Metropolitan Areas		Towns and Cities		Open Country	
Intended	Voted	Intended	Voted	Intended	Voted
Truman:					
32%	47%	24%	27%	34%	24%
Dewey					
30	32	34	30	16	12

Courtesy of University of Michigan

Table 4.1 Vote by population density

The above table makes clear that the largest gains for the Democrats were in metropolitan areas. Thirty-two percent said in October that they would vote for Truman, forty-seven voted for him in November. Most of these gains came from that portion of the sample population expressing indecision in October. Voters in rural areas went the other way. In October, 34 percent of those surveyed in October voiced an intention to vote for Truman; however, only 24 percent did. An examination of votes by occupation is also enlightening:[173]

	Professional and Managerial Intended/Voted	Other White Color Intended/Voted	Skilled and Semi-Skilled Intended/Voted	Unskilled Intended/Voted	Farmers Intended/Voted
Truman:	20% / 15	29% / 38%	35% / 52%	22% / 33%	34% / 25%
Dewey	53 / 57	36 / 39	17 / 15	25 / 12	18 / 13

Courtesy of the University of Michigan

Table 4.2 Socio-economic vote break-down

Table 4.2 Socio-economic vote break-down

The question of income adds yet another dimension to the voting dynamics of 1948. Candidate preference appeared to be income-sensitive. $3,000 - $4,000 was the dividing point for voting behavior. In this bracket voters were about evenly split between the Republican and Democratic candidates. At incomes lower than $3,000 the Democrats had a majority; over $4,000

[173] Ibid., 24.

Republican preferences prevailed. As one slides up or down the income scale from this mid-point, the differences become more pronounced the further one gets from the mid-point. Those with incomes of $1,000 - $3,000 voted two-to-one for Truman; those with incomes over $5,000 voted two-to-one for Dewey. Significantly, the study revealed that the trend toward Truman between October and November involved all income groups. Truman's greatest gain was in the $4,000 - $5,000 category, and the gain in that income category alone was enough to reduce Dewey's lead from one of nineteen points to three points.

Although the above information is partially helpful since it answers the question of which candidate various groups voted for, it doesn't help with the more informative question of *why* they voted as they did. The University of Michigan pollsters discussed the question of "why" with voters after the 1948 election. Each voter in the survey's sample population was asked:

"Why do you think people voted for Truman?" and

"Are there any other kinds of reasons why you think people voted for Truman?" and

"Do you think there was anything special about Truman that made some people vote against him?"

An identical set of questions was then asked concerning Dewey. Only then was the responded queried about his or her vote with the question: "What made you decide to vote the way you did?"

The pollsters noted interesting differences between the perceptions of Democrat and Republican voters, but they also noticed agreement on some major attributes and group-loyalties that were not party specific. Analysts of the survey results concluded that Truman was perceived by respondents as attracting support because of what he stood for; support of Dewey was perceived in primarily negative terms. Dewey voters expressed an interest in simply making a change. The analysts also concluded that Truman's success was the result of voters identifying him with the interests of certain segments of the population. Specifically, his identification with labor, farmers, or the "common people" generally. The survey report presents what it characterizes as the most common genre of comments regarding Truman:[174]

> Your farmers and laborers put him in; he's been playing straight with them and naturally they want it to continue. He was for the average man, which is what we need.
>
> I think he's more for the common man. Thinks more about what's the best for people. Dewey never did take any stand on any matter.

[174] Ibid., 42.

Because they were afraid of another depression and if Dewey got in it would be tougher for labor.

I think he is for the little people like us. His ideals were like Lincoln's.

The following table presents an overview of reasons expressed by voters during the post-election survey conducted in November:[175]

	Mentioned in Connection With:	
Reasons	Truman	Dewey
Time for a change		32
Foreign policy	2	4
Tautological and other reasons	6	9
Identified with certain groups	46	11
Domestic policies	18	7
Will maintain prosperity: avoid depression	18	3
Effect of campaign	16	4
Better man: other person attributes	16	19
Experienced: good record	13	19
Party allegiance	6	20
No time for a change	4	
Don't know	7	13
Not ascertained	5	6

NOTE: The columns total more than 100% because some respondents gave more than one answer

Courtesy of the University of Michigan

Table 4.3 Reasons Expressed for Vote Decisions

[175] Ibid., 43.

The last issue examined by the University of Michigan pollsters addressed issues of personality. They found that respondents used words like "capable" and "competent" to describe Dewey more than twice as often as the same words were used to describe Truman. Only one in ten respondents characterized Truman in terms of capable or competent, and then it was more often used in the context of his experience as president rather than in the context of his personality. Respondents were much more likely to attach adjectives denoting feelings of personal warmth, such as "honest," "sincere," "spunky," or "down-to-earth." The following table summarizes personal attributes voiced by the respondents.[176]

	Truman	Dewey
Experienced, capable, competent, intelligent	10%	23%
Honest, sincere, fair	7	4
Down-to-earth, common touch, understanding	7	*
Fearless, spunky, fighting, aggressive	4	2
Small, incompetent, inefficient	17	2
Indecisive, vacillating, doesn't know his own mind	3	*
Insincere, deceptive, two-faced	1	1
Smug, complacent, over-confident, patronizing, superior	*	19
Non-committal, backs away from issues, on the fence	1	11
Floppish, over-dressed, appearance antagonizing	*	6
Short-tempered, hot-headed, shoves people around	*	1
No attribute mentioned	59	53

* Denotes less than one-half of one percent.
NOTE: Columns total more than 100% because some respondents mentioned more than one attribute.

Courtesy of the University of Michigan

Table 4.4 Personal Attributes Mentioned by Voters

[176] Ibid., 50.

Would Truman have been elected to the senate, to the vice presidency, or to the presidency if he had no farming history? And, would his politics have been different had he not farmed? Perhaps both questions are too simplistic to answer. But, if the question asked were whether his success was the result of his farming, his association with Masons, his association with veterans groups, his formative years of financial struggles, his rural up-bringing, and his business failures, the answer would probably be, "all of the above." However, even if all these factors had been present but within a different social and economic context, the results may have been different. For example, if there were not a significant percentage of voters who perceived themselves as disenfranchised and to whom New Deal legislation provided hope, Truman may not have been sent to the U.S. Senate by Missouri voters in 1934. This block of voters could identify with another "common man" who had experienced struggles and failures.

It was Truman's social and political activities, such as Masons, county politics, the Baptist church, and veterans' organizations that got the attention of the voters; it was a sense of commonality, of shared experiences, that got their votes. Had Truman's humble origins been something other than farmer, perhaps blacksmith, teamster or cooper, would be have still gotten those votes? Probably yes. But, "farmer" was an occupation any non-urbanite could very readily identify and understand. The title itself was more immediately recognizable that "cooper," or "teamster," especially during Truman's era.

So, was his farming background essential to his political success? No, not standing alone; but, as one of several important table legs supporting his platform, it was probably essential.

Truman, the advocate of Every Man, continued his battles after his election to the presidency. The Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) serves as a good example. Created in 1941 by executive order, President Roosevelt charged the committee with overseeing a policy of nondiscrimination in government employment and in private industries performing defense contracts. In June of 1946 Congress killed the committee by failing to authorize appropriations.

Following his 1948 election, Truman championed the enactment of legislation establishing the FEPC, rather than continuing the risky appropriations associated with an executive order based FEPC. Opponents of the FEPC over the years labeled the FEPC as everything from un-American to Communistic. In fact, in the 1948 campaign, pre-printed postcards were mailed to southern workers reporting that Truman was seeking to "force you to work with Negroes and other undesirables." During Truman's presidency, a total of seventy such bills were

introduced in both houses of Congress. None passed. Truman was forced to continue establishing such committee by executive order. He first created the Fair Employment Board in the Civil Service Commission on July 26, 1948. On December 3, 1951, he created the President's Committee on Government Contract Compliance. It was not until 1964 that organic legislation creating an agency responsible for civil rights in employment was enacted. Notwithstanding Congress's intransigence, Truman continued to argue for the rights of the common man.[177]

The question remains: what effect did Harry Truman's Grandview farming experience have on his political success? The simple answer propounded by some writers, that it was of primary significance, is probably so overly simplistic that it is misleading. The complete answer is probably that his farming experience is one of several significant factors that influenced both his success in the ballot box and his policies in office. His farming experience was most likely broadly interpreted by voters, particularly in the 1948 presidential campaign, as being an indication that he was a common man seeking office, and not a politician courting the labor vote. His success in 1948 was the result of his winning not merely the farm vote, but more generally, the working class vote. He successfully captured the vote of the urban laborer, both skilled and unskilled, as well as the farm vote. In fact, statistically, he received a higher percentage of votes in metropolitan areas, and towns than he did in the farm areas. But, what motivated those votes? According to the survey conducted by the University of Michigan in 1952 (see above), almost half of the voters queried reported that they believed votes were cast for Harry Truman because of his identification with certain groups (see Figure 4.3, above). Perhaps of equal significance is the fact that the voters queried by the pollsters used words such as experienced, capable, competent, and intelligent twice as often in describing Dewey than in their descriptions of Truman. However, the same voters almost twice as often used adjectives such as honest, sincere, fair, down-to-earth, common touch, understanding, fearless, spunky, fighting, and aggressive in describing Truman than they did when they described Dewey. These numbers argue for the conclusion that Truman, for whatever reason, owed his success in the 1948 election to his being perceived as the common man. His Grandview farming, no doubt, enhanced that perception. But, perhaps it did more. Perhaps the farming experience was one of several significant factors that helped mold a personality that would in fact be fearless, spunky, fighting, and aggressive.

Harry Truman's success in keeping the farm going for eleven years required a fearless, fighting spunk that is rarely

[177] Kirkendall, ed., *The Harry S. Truman Encyclopedia*, 125.

called for in other endeavors. The factory worker, the carpenter, the plumber have co-workers and supervisors to rely upon for advice, assistance, direction, and motivation. The farmer sows his future alone. The lawyer, physician, dentist, teacher, and salesperson all have assistants, associates, or neighbors in the next office to provide at least the illusion of community. The farmer sits alone astride his plow coaxing a yoke of reluctant oxen to drag a plow incessantly up and back through a soil fallow of guarantees. Few other professions demand and engender the determinate self-reliance essential to farming.

Perhaps, also, the farming experience in Grandview was one of several significant factors that helped mold a personality that would in fact be honest, sincere and fair. A rural farm operation, such as the Grandview farm, required business dealings with persons and businesses to whom the farmer would return time after time. Grain and seed suppliers, equipment dealers, blacksmiths, millers, stock traders, and grain buyers were all a permanent part of the farm and the farmer's life. Unlike a contemporary freeway interchange business, the farmer would deal with those same individuals repeatedly. Fairness, truthfulness, and sincerity were a rural currency without which the farmer, and his farm were severely handicapped.

So, did the Grandview farming experience influence Harry Truman's political life? Yes. Those very attributes used by the voters when they talked about Truman with the University of Michigan pollsters probably came from the farm. The very personality that audiences perceived as emanating from the rear platform of Truman's campaign train, and the personality they elected to the presidency probably grew to maturity in the Grandview soil, were strengthened by the incessant reminders of humility that came from sun, wind, rain and drought. And those same personality traits were greatly broadened by the search for community among others to whom those same traits meant wealth, success, and a eulogy a child would be proud to publish.