

# SECTION 1 Presidential Politics

## Guide to Reading

### Main Idea

Warren Harding's administration suffered from several scandals. His successor, Calvin Coolidge, promised to support business.

### Key Terms and Names

normalcy, Ohio Gang, Albert B. Fall, Teapot Dome scandal, immunity, Progressive Party, Robert M. La Follette

### Reading Strategy

**Taking Notes** As you read about Presidents Harding and Coolidge, use the major headings of the section to create an outline similar to the one below.

Presidential Politics  
I. The Harding Administration  
A.  
B.  
II.  
A.  
B.

### Reading Objectives

- **Describe** the corruption that tainted the Harding administration.
- **Explain** how Calvin Coolidge restored public confidence after assuming the presidency.

### Section Theme

**Government and Democracy** The "Ohio Gang" of the Harding administration created scandals and political upheaval.

### Preview of Events



## ★ An American Story ★



*Calvin Coolidge (right) being sworn in as president after his 1924 election*

In August 1923, Vice President Calvin Coolidge was taking a short vacation at his family's homestead in Plymouth Notch, Vermont. The straitlaced Coolidge went to bed at 9:00 as usual on August 2, but at 2:30 A.M., his father woke him. "I noticed that his voice trembled," Coolidge said later. "I knew that something of the gravest nature had occurred." After learning that President Warren G. Harding was dead, Coolidge dressed hurriedly and went downstairs. Shortly afterward, in a small, sparsely furnished room lit by a flickering kerosene lamp, the elder Coolidge, a farmer and justice of the peace, got out the family Bible and administered the presidential oath of office to his son.

Later, while painting a portrait of the new president, artist Charles Hopkinson asked, "Mr. Coolidge, what was the first thought that came into your mind when you were told that Mr. Harding was dead and the presidency was yours?" Coolidge replied, "I thought I could swing it."

—adapted from *Flappers, Bootleggers, "Typhoid Mary" and the Bomb*

## The Harding Administration

Coolidge assumed the presidency during a time when Americans yearned to go back to simpler and steadier times after the carnage of World War I. Coolidge's predecessor, Warren G. Harding, had tailored his presidency to this goal. The oldest of eight children, Harding was born in 1865 in Corsica, Ohio. As an adult, he was active in civic and fraternal organizations, and he also published the *Marion Daily Star*. In 1898 Harding was elected to the Ohio legislature. He fit in comfortably with the powerful Ohio Republican



political machine and won election as lieutenant governor in 1903. He failed in his bid for governor in 1910 but was elected to the United States Senate four years later. After serving one term in the Senate, Harding ran for and won the presidency in 1920.

**A Self-Doubter in the White House** With his silver hair and impressive bearing, Harding looked like a president, but he thought he lacked the intellectual qualifications for the job. “I have such a sure understanding of my own inefficiency,” he once said, “that I should really be ashamed to presume myself fitted to reach out for a place of such responsibility.”

Despite such doubts, Harding’s political philosophy fit in well with the times. He ran on the campaign slogan to return to **normalcy**, or a return to “normal” life after the war. Harding’s charm and genial manner endeared him to the nation. The quiet gloom of President Wilson’s last years was replaced by the open, easygoing atmosphere of the first days of the Harding administration. On the day of his election, he went out to play a round of golf—a confident, relaxed gesture.

**GOVERNMENT**

**The Ohio Gang** Harding made several distinguished appointments to the cabinet, including former Supreme Court justice Charles Evans Hughes as secretary of state, former Food Administrator Herbert Hoover as secretary of commerce, and business tycoon Andrew Mellon as secretary of the treasury.

Many of Harding’s other appointments, however, were disastrous. He gave many cabinet posts and other high-level jobs to friends and political allies from Ohio. Harding named Charles “Doc” Sawyer from Marion, Ohio, as White House physician, a post that came with the rank of brigadier general. Harding made his boyhood friend Daniel Crissinger chairman of the Federal Reserve Board and selected Colonel Charles R. Forbes—another Ohio acquaintance—to head the Veterans Bureau.

Harding felt more comfortable among his old poker-playing friends, known as the **Ohio Gang**, than he did around such sober and serious people as Herbert Hoover. Alice Roosevelt Longworth, the daughter of Theodore Roosevelt, was a keen

observer of Washington society. She wrote that it was common to find the Ohio Gang in the White House study, and here she describes a typical scene:

“The air [would be] heavy with tobacco smoke, trays with bottles containing every imaginable brand of whiskey . . . cards and poker chips at hand—a general atmosphere of waistcoat unbuttoned, feet on desk, and spittoons alongside.”

—quoted in *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914–1932*

The Ohio Gang did more than drink, smoke, and play poker with the president. Some members used their positions to sell government jobs, pardons, and protection from prosecution. Forbes sold scarce medical supplies from veterans hospitals and kept the money for himself, costing the taxpayers about \$250 million. When Harding learned what was going on, he complained privately that he had been betrayed. He said that he had no troubles with his enemies, but his friends were a different story: “They’re the ones that keep me walking the floor nights!”



*Inkwell depicting Warren Harding*



**Picturing History**

**Return to Normalcy** Warren Harding did some of his campaigning from his front porch in Ohio. **Why do you think Harding’s slogan, “Return to Normalcy,” was successful?**





### Fact

### Fiction

### Folklore

**Cartoon Symbols** Political cartoonists routinely use symbols to get their message across. Two of the most enduring have been the donkey, representing the Democrats, and the elephant, representing the Republicans (also known as the GOP, or the Grand Old Party). On November 7, 1874, cartoonist Thomas Nast became the first to use the symbols in a cartoon that appeared in *Harper's Weekly*.

In June 1923, amid the scandal in the Veterans Bureau and rumors of other unethical behavior, Harding and the First Lady left to tour the West. En route from Alaska to California, he became ill with what was probably a heart attack. He died in San Francisco on August 2, shortly before the news of the Forbes scandal broke.

**The Teapot Dome Scandal** Other scandals also came to light. Harding's secretary of the interior, **Albert B. Fall**, secretly allowed private interests to lease lands containing U.S. Navy oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming, and Elk Hills, California. In return, Fall received bribes from these private interests totaling more than \$300,000. Eventually the Senate investigated what the newspapers named the **Teapot Dome scandal**, and Secretary Fall became the first cabinet officer in history to go to prison.

The last Harding administration scandal involved Attorney General Harry Daugherty, Harding's former campaign manager. It concerned a German-owned American company that the American government had seized during World War I as enemy property. To acquire the company and its valuable chemical patents, a German agent bribed a "go-between" politician, and a portion of the bribe ended up in an Ohio bank account that Daugherty controlled.

Under investigation by his own Justice Department, Daugherty refused to turn over requested files and bank records. He also refused to testify under oath, claiming **immunity**, or freedom from prosecution, on the grounds that he had had confidential dealings with the president. Daugherty's actions disgusted the new president, Calvin Coolidge, who demanded his resignation. The tattered reputation of Harding's presidency dissolved in scandal and corruption.

**Reading Check** **Describing** Why was Harding's emphasis on "normalcy" an effective campaign strategy?

## The Coolidge Administration

Just as Harding's promise of "normalcy" had appealed to war-weary voters in 1920, the virtue of his successor came as a welcome change from the turmoil of the Harding administration's corruption. Born on July 4, 1872, John Calvin Coolidge grew up on the Vermont farm that his family had worked for five generations. While governor of Massachusetts, Coolidge rose to national prominence for his handling of the Boston police strike in 1919. Shortly afterward, he was asked to run as Harding's vice president.

**"Silent Cal" Takes Over** Coolidge was very different from Harding. Harding had enjoyed the easy conversation and company of old friends. Coolidge, joked a critic, could be "silent in five languages." With his simple and frugal manner, he contrasted not only with Harding but also with the spirit of the time, the booming, materialistic era of the Roaring Twenties.

Coolidge quickly distanced himself from the Harding administration. He named Harlan Fiske Stone, dean of the Columbia Law School, to replace Daugherty as attorney general. He also asked the most capable cabinet members—Hughes, Mellon, and Hoover—to stay on.



### Analyzing Political Cartoons

**Teapot Dome Scandal** In this cartoon, Democrats are enjoying the troubles the Teapot Dome scandal has caused for the GOP elephant. **Who is shown being dragged along by the scandal? Why?**





Coolidge’s philosophy of government was simple. He believed that prosperity rested on business leadership and that part of his job as president was to make sure that government interfered with business and industry as little as possible. He once said, “Four-fifths of all our troubles in this life would disappear if we would only sit down and keep still.”

Calmly and cautiously, Coolidge worked to restore integrity to the presidency. In the year following Harding’s death and the revelations of scandals, Coolidge’s presidency avoided crises and continued the nation’s expanding prosperity. Coolidge easily won the Republican Party’s nomination for president in 1924.

**The Election of 1924** Even though the scandals of the Harding administration presented the Democrats with a ready-made issue, they lost the chance for victory. Deeply divided between their urban Eastern constituency and their rural following in the South and West, the Democrats had difficulty agreeing on a nominee. They finally compromised on John W. Davis of West Virginia after 103 attempts to find someone acceptable to a majority of the delegates.

The Republicans effectively campaigned on the slogan “Keep Cool with Coolidge,” and they urged Americans to retain the party that favored business. In his economic policies, Coolidge aligned himself—and the government—with prosperity and big business.

Not everyone was content to choose between the Republicans and Democrats. Defectors from both parties joined farm, labor, and religious activists to form the new Progressive Party, nominating Wisconsin senator **Robert M. La Follette** as their candidate. Although La Follette captured 16.6



### Picturing History

**Cool Coolidge** President Coolidge believed the nation would run more smoothly if the government was less involved. [How did the public react to Coolidge’s message on Election Day?](#)

percent of the popular vote, or a total of almost 5 million, he and Davis combined could not keep the Republicans from winning the election. Coolidge won easily with more than half the popular vote and 382 electoral votes.

In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1925, Coolidge said, “The chief business of the American people is business. The man who builds a factory builds a temple. The man who works there worships there.” The *Wall Street Journal* joyously exclaimed, “Never before, here or anywhere else, has a government been so completely fused with business.” By avoiding war, reform, and scandal, Coolidge promised to give the United States the normalcy Harding had failed to deliver.

**Reading Check Summarizing** How did Calvin Coolidge restore public confidence after becoming president?

## SECTION 1 ASSESSMENT

### Checking for Understanding

- Define:** [normalcy](#), [immunity](#).
- Identify:** Ohio Gang, Albert B. Fall, Teapot Dome scandal, Robert M. La Follette.
- Evaluate** the effects of the Teapot Dome scandal on citizens’ views of the federal government.

### Reviewing Themes

- Government and Democracy** How did the Ohio Gang tarnish the Harding Administration?

### Critical Thinking

- Interpreting** How did the Democrats lose the chance for victory in the election of 1924?
- Categorizing** Use a graphic organizer similar to the one below to compare and contrast the politics and presidencies of Harding and Coolidge.

	Politics	Presidency
Harding		
Coolidge		

### Analyzing Visuals

- Analyzing Photographs** Examine the photograph of Calvin Coolidge on this page. How did Coolidge’s actions demonstrate effective leadership following the Harding administration?

### Writing About History

- Expository Writing** Imagine you are a newspaper reporter during President Harding’s term. Write an article breaking the news of the Teapot Dome scandal.