1952

Dwight D. Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson II

A 50-minute lesson on the 1952 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Dwight D. Eisenhower (Republican) · 442 EV	RUNNER-UP Adlai Stevenson II (Democratic) · 89 EV
KEY ISSUE Korean War; communist threat (McCarthyism); corruption in Truman administration	TURNOUT 62.3%

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3. Background: key terms + source
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1952: Dwight D. Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson II

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two structural conditions in 1950-52 America that would produce a Republican Eisenhower victory. For each identify the specific Truman-era development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	1952 election was 42nd U.S. presidential election. Produced Dwight D. Eisenhower's 442-89 EV victory over Democrat Adlai Stevenson II. First Republican presidential victory since Hoover 1928. Eisenhower's 55.2% popular vote ended 20 years of Democratic presidents. Political conditions: Korean War stalemated by mid-1951 (~33,651 American military deaths by 1953). Joseph McCarthy's February 9, 1950 Wheeling WV speech launched anti-Communist demagoguery era. Truman approval fell from 87% (May 1945) to 22% (January 1952). March 29, 1952 Truman announced he would not seek another term. Republican National Convention Chicago July 7-11, 1952. Convention chose between two candidates: Sen Robert Taft of Ohio (62, "Mr. Republican," conservative isolationist) and General Eisenhower (62, internationalist Republican). Eisenhower defeated Taft on first ballot after credentials fight over disputed Texas, Georgia, Louisiana delegations. Senator Richard Nixon of California (39, anti-Communist crusader who had been instrumental in 1948 Alger Hiss case) VP. Republican platform criticized Truman's Korean War conduct, McCarthyism opposition, federal spending. Democratic National Convention Chicago July 21-26, 1952 drafted Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson II on third ballot. Stevenson 52, brilliant orator educated Princeton + Harvard Law + Northwestern Law. State Department official during WWII. U.S. delegate to UN founding 1945. Elected Illinois Governor 1948 by largest margin in Illinois history. Reluctant candidate - drafted. Senator John Sparkman of Alabama (moderate Southern Democrat) VP. Campaign's most famous moment: September 23, 1952 Checkers speech. Wealthy California businessmen had created $18,000 political fund for Nixon's personal use. September 18, 1952 NY Post story ("Secret Rich Men's Trust Fund Keeps Nixon

in Style Far Beyond his Salary") threatened Nixon's place on ticket. Eisenhower told Nixon: "I don't know whether to keep you or not." Nixon arranged 30-minute televised address from LA studio. ~60M viewers + additional millions radio. Nixon defended his honor by listing modest personal finances: wife Pat's "respectable Republican cloth coat" (not fur coat); $80 monthly mortgage; debts. Mentioned Texas businessman had sent daughters Tricia (6) and Julie (4) Cocker Spaniel puppy: "regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it" - because Tricia named dog "Checkers." Eisenhower kept Nixon on ticket. First major political use of television to overcome scandal.

Eisenhower's campaign themes: (1) Korean War - October 24, 1952 Detroit speech "I shall go to Korea." Politically devastating - implied military expertise could resolve war. (2) "K1C2" framework: Korea, Communism (domestic), Corruption. (3) "Modern Republicanism" - acceptance of New Deal programs combined with fiscal conservatism and Cold War internationalism.

Campaign slogan "I Like Ike" simple, friendly, irresistible. First major political campaign to use professional Madison Avenue advertising. Rosser Reeves of Ted Bates & Co. created "Eisenhower Answers America" TV commercials. First presidential campaign extensively to use television advertising.

Stevenson's campaign structurally weaker. Brilliant oratory appealed to educated voters but did not connect with mass audiences. Republican ads mocked Stevenson as "egghead." His divorced status politically unusual.

Eisenhower visited Korea December 2-5, 1952 after November 4 election. Concluded the war could not be won; structurally set up July 27, 1953 armistice.

Eisenhower won 442 EV; Stevenson 89. Eisenhower carried 39 states; Stevenson 9. Popular vote: Eisenhower 34,075,529 (55.2%); Stevenson 27,375,090 (44.3%); minor candidates ~280,000. Eisenhower-Stevenson margin: 6,700,439.

Geographic pattern: Eisenhower carried New England, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest (except KY, MO, WV), Mountain West, West Coast, plus 4 Southern states (FL, TN, TX, VA) - first significant Republican Southern penetration since 1928 Hoover. Stevenson held Deep South (AL, AR, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC) plus KY, WV. 1952 4-state Southern breakthrough structurally consequential - foreshadowed 1960s Republican Southern realignment.

Eisenhower inaugurated January 20, 1953. Governed as "Modern Republican" - accepting most New Deal programs while emphasizing fiscal conservatism and Cold War internationalism.

1953-61 Eisenhower achievements: (1) July 27, 1953 Korean armistice (38th parallel division persists today). (2) 1953-54 covert operations: Iran (Mossadegh coup August

		1953) + Guatemala (Arbenz coup June 1954). (3) May 17, 1954 Brown v. Board of Education (Chief Justice Earl Warren - whom Eisenhower appointed October 1953). (4) 1954-55 Indochina decisions: declined to intervene at Dien Bien Phu; Geneva Accords July 1954 partitioned Vietnam at 17th parallel. (5) June 29, 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act = Interstate Highway System ($25B authorization). (6) September 1957 Little Rock crisis - Eisenhower sent 101st Airborne federal troops to enforce school desegregation at Central High. (7) October 4, 1957 Sputnik response - NASA founding 1958 + National Defense Education Act 1958. (8) January 17, 1961 farewell address warning of "military-industrial complex." 1952 election's structural significance threefold: (1) Ended 20 years of Democratic presidents. (2) 4-state Southern breakthrough foreshadowed 1960s Republican Southern realignment. (3) Eisenhower campaign's professional advertising methods (Madison Avenue, "I Like Ike," TV commercials) inaugurated modern television-driven presidential campaign era. Eisenhower would win 1956 in even bigger landslide over Stevenson (457-73 EV). 1953-61 presidency established structural framework for post-WWII Republican governance: acceptance of New Deal welfare state combined with fiscal conservatism and Cold War internationalism.
10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

Background

Before the worksheet, review the key terms below and then read the primary source carefully. The two source-analysis questions on the worksheet (questions 6 and 7) ask you to quote from the excerpt.

Key terms

Dwight D. Eisenhower

34th U.S. president (1953-61). Supreme Allied Commander in Europe WWII. Organized D-Day. First NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe 1950-52. Won 1952 with 442-89 EV; 1956 with 457-73 EV.

Adlai Stevenson II

Illinois Governor (1949-53) and 1952 Democratic nominee (also 1956). Brilliant orator. Lost both elections to Eisenhower.

"I shall go to Korea"

Eisenhower's October 24, 1952 Detroit campaign promise. Pledged personal assessment of Korean War.

K1C2 framework

Eisenhower's 1952 campaign framework: Korea (war stalemate), Communism (domestic subversion), Corruption (Truman scandals). Three structural attacks on Truman administration.

"I Like Ike"

Eisenhower's famous 1952 campaign slogan. First major political campaign using professional Madison Avenue advertising.

Checkers speech

Nixon's September 23, 1952 televised address defending himself from $18K political fund accusations. Mentioned daughters' Cocker Spaniel "Checkers." First major political use of television to overcome scandal.

McCarthyism

The 1950-54 anti-Communist demagoguery era named for Sen Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin. February 9, 1950 Wheeling WV speech ("list of 205") launched the era. Produced loyalty investigations, blacklists, and political fear. McCarthy censured by Senate December 1954 after Army-McCarthy hearings.

Checkers Speech

RICHARD M. NIXON, SEPTEMBER 23, 1952

Nixon delivered this 30-minute televised address from El Capitan Theatre in Los Angeles on September 23, 1952. ~60 million viewers + additional millions on radio - approximately 2/3 of U.S. adult population. The speech was a structural response to accusations of improper $18,000 political fund. Nixon defended himself by listing his modest personal finances and concluded with the "Checkers" passage about his daughters' Cocker Spaniel. The speech was politically masterful. Eisenhower kept Nixon on the ticket. The "Checkers" passage became iconic. The speech is widely cited as the first major political use of television to overcome a scandal and is the structural precursor to subsequent televised political defenses.

> *"One other thing I probably should tell you, because if I don't they'll probably be saying this about me too. We did get something - a gift - after the election. A man down in Texas heard Pat on the radio mention the fact that our two youngsters would like to have a dog. And believe it or not, the day before we left on this campaign trip we got a message from Union Station in Baltimore saying they had a package for us. We went down to get it. You know what it was? It was a little Cocker Spaniel dog in a crate that he had sent all the way from Texas. Black and white spotted. And our little girl - Tricia, the six-year-old - named it Checkers. And you know, the kids, like all kids, love the dog. And I just want to say this right now, that regardless of what they say about it, we're going to keep it."*

Nixon, "Checkers Speech" (Los Angeles, September 23, 1952). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ⁻150 words.

The 1952 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Eisenhower win in 1952?

( ) A. 372
( ) B. 404
( ) C. 442
( ) D. 472

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

What was the name of Nixon's daughters' Cocker Spaniel?

( ) A. Buddy
( ) B. Checkers
( ) C. Spot
( ) D. Tippy

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was Eisenhower famous for before he ran for president?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Checkers speech demonstrate the political power of television?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Nixon says "regardless of what they say about it, we're going to keep it." What is the rhetorical purpose of this line?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1952 election map, identify Eisenhower's 39 states and Stevenson's 9 states. What does Eisenhower's 4-state Southern breakthrough (FL, TN, TX, VA) reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

442. Eisenhower 442; Stevenson 89.

AP students should know the 442-89 split.

QUESTION 2

Checkers. Tricia Nixon named the Cocker Spaniel.

AP students should know the dog's name.

QUESTION 3

Eisenhower was famous as a WWII general. Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during WWII (1943-45). Organized June 6, 1944 D-Day invasion of Normandy. Army Chief of Staff (1945-48). Columbia University president (1948-50). First NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (1950-52). Both parties had begged him to run since 1947. Sen Lodge entered him in January 1952 New Hampshire Republican primary; he won and decided to seek the Republican nomination.

AP students should know Eisenhower's background.

QUESTION 4

The Checkers speech demonstrated television's power in five structural ways: (1) Mass audience reach - ~60 million viewers + millions on radio = ~2/3 of U.S. adult population. Unprecedented for a U.S. political speech. (2) Direct candidate-to-voter communication without media filter. (3) Emotional intimacy through television close-ups and voice tones. (4) Effective scandal management - Nixon converted embarrassing financial story into sympathetic personal narrative. The dog reference ("we're gonna keep it") was relatable storytelling. (5) Bypass of hostile media - Nixon made his case directly. The cumulative effect: Eisenhower kept Nixon on ticket; Republican voters supported Nixon overwhelmingly; scandal effectively ended. Structural precursor to later televised political defenses.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance.

QUESTION 5

Nixon's "regardless of what they say about it, we're going to keep it" line uses three rhetorical strategies: (1) Defiance against critics - "regardless of what they say about it" frames Nixon's opponents as petty critics attacking innocent personal pleasures. (2) Family-protective masculinity - the line positions Nixon as defending his daughters' beloved pet rather than admitting any financial impropriety. (3) Plain-spoken decisiveness - "we're going to keep it" is short, declarative, and emotionally direct. The line shifted the political narrative from "did Nixon misuse a political fund?" to "should the Nixon daughters be allowed to keep their dog?" The shift was politically masterful. Subsequent political analysts have studied the Checkers speech as a model for scandal management through narrative redirection.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 6

Eisenhower states (39): New England, Mid-Atlantic, Midwest (except KY, MO, WV - wait MO went Eisenhower? Actually MO went Stevenson 1952), Mountain West, West Coast, plus 4 Southern states (FL, TN, TX, VA). Stevenson states (9): Deep South (AL, AR, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC) plus KY + WV. The 1952 4-state Southern breakthrough (FL, TN, TX, VA) reveals: (1) First significant Republican Southern penetration since 1928 Hoover (which had been anti-Catholic backlash against Smith). 1952 was structural Republican Southern victory based on Eisenhower's personal appeal and Truman unpopularity. (2) The 4 breakthrough states were "Outer South" / "Border South" - less Deep South in racial politics, more economically developed (Florida tourism + Tennessee TVA + Texas oil + Virginia federal employment). (3) Foreshadowed 1960s Republican Southern realignment: 1964 Goldwater carried Deep South (AL, GA, LA, MS, SC); 1968 Wallace + Nixon carried entire South; 1972 Nixon carried all 50 states. (4) The 1952 breakthrough was Eisenhower's personal achievement; subsequent Republican Southern victories would require the 1960s civil rights realignment. The structural lesson: a war-hero candidate can break partisan loyalties that would otherwise persist.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance.