1952

Dwight D. Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson II

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1952: Dwight D. Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson II

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1952 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1952 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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 (FDR 1933-45; Truman 1945-53). Political conditions transformed by Truman's second-term troubles. Korean War (June 1950 - July 1953) stalemated by mid-1951. ~33,651 American military deaths through 1953. Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin'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. Truman exempted from 22nd Amendment but his political vulnerability made another term politically untenable. Republican National Convention Chicago July 7-11, 1952. Convention chose between 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. Sen Richard Nixon of California (39, anti-Communist crusader from 1948 Alger Hiss case) VP. Nixon's anti-Communist credentials and youth balanced Eisenhower's war-hero status and age. 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 Dept official WWII. UN delegate 1945. Illinois Governor 1948 by largest margin in Illinois history. Reluctant candidate. Sen

John Sparkman of Alabama VP.

Checkers speech September 23, 1952: ~60M viewers + millions radio. Nixon defended himself from $18K political fund accusations. Mentioned daughters' Cocker Spaniel "Checkers": "regardless of what they say about it, we're gonna keep it." Eisenhower kept Nixon on ticket. First major political use of television to overcome scandal.

Eisenhower campaign themes: (1) Korean War - October 24, 1952 Detroit speech "I shall go to Korea." (2) "K1C2" framework: Korea, Communism, Corruption. (3) "Modern Republicanism" - acceptance of New Deal combined with fiscal conservatism and Cold War internationalism.

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

Stevenson's campaign weaker. Brilliant oratory ("If we let ourselves become victims of our own indifference, then we shall destroy by complacency and self-satisfaction the freedom and democracy our generation has been called upon to defend") appealed to educated voters but didn't connect with mass audiences. Republican ads mocked Stevenson as "egghead."

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

Eisenhower 442 EV; Stevenson 89. Eisenhower 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 + Mountain West + West Coast + 4 Southern states (FL, TN, TX, VA) - first significant Republican Southern penetration since 1928. Stevenson held Deep South (AL, AR, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC) + KY + WV. 1952 4-state Southern breakthrough foreshadowed 1960s Republican Southern realignment.

Eisenhower inaugurated January 20, 1953. Governed as "Modern Republican."

1953-61 Eisenhower achievements: July 27, 1953 Korean armistice; 1953-54 covert operations (Iran Mossadegh coup August 1953; Guatemala Arbenz coup June 1954); May 17, 1954 Brown v. Board (Chief Justice Earl Warren - Eisenhower appointee October 1953); 1954-55 Indochina decisions (declined Dien Bien Phu intervention; Geneva Accords July 1954); June 29, 1956 Interstate Highway Act ($25B); September 1957 Little Rock crisis (101st Airborne); October 1957 Sputnik response

		(NASA 1958, NDEA 1958); January 17, 1961 farewell address ("military-industrial complex"). 1952 election structural significance: (1) Ended 20 years of Democratic presidents. (2) 4-state Southern breakthrough foreshadowed 1960s realignment. (3) Eisenhower campaign's Madison Avenue/television methods inaugurated modern campaign era. Eisenhower would win 1956 in bigger landslide over Stevenson (457-73 EV). 1953-61 presidency established post-WWII Republican governance framework. The 1952-60 Eisenhower era can be analyzed structurally as the consolidation of the New Deal welfare state under Republican governance. Eisenhower did not attempt to repeal Social Security, the Wagner Act, or other major New Deal programs. He actually expanded Social Security (1954 amendments added 10M more workers) and created the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (April 1953). The "Modern Republicanism" framework accepted federal welfare-state programs while maintaining fiscal conservatism. The framework would persist through JFK (1961-63), LBJ (1963-69), and Nixon (1969-74) - until Reagan's 1980 conservative revolution attempted to reverse it. The 1952 Eisenhower victory's long-term structural significance was paradoxical. The Republican return to the presidency was operationally less significant than expected - Eisenhower governed within the New Deal framework rather than reversing it. The political-cultural change was more structural: Eisenhower's 1953-61 era was the high point of post-WWII U.S. economic confidence, suburban expansion (Levittowns 1947+), and cultural consensus. The 1960s would shatter the consensus through civil rights, Vietnam, and counterculture. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1952 election tells you about the New Deal Coalition era that the textbook didn't?"

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.

Adlai Stevenson II
Illinois Governor (1949-53) and 1952 Democratic nominee (also 1956). Brilliant orator. Reluctant candidate.

"I shall go to Korea"
Eisenhower's October 24, 1952 Detroit campaign promise.

K1C2 framework
Eisenhower's 1952 campaign framework: Korea, Communism, Corruption.

"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. First major political use of television to overcome scandal.

McCarthyism
The 1950-54 anti-Communist demagoguery era named for Sen Joseph McCarthy. February 9, 1950 Wheeling WV speech launched the era. McCarthy censured by Senate December 1954.

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.

> *"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). Public domain.

The 1952 Election

Read the background page (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain Eisenhower's "Modern Republicanism" framework and how it shaped 1950s-60s U.S. politics.

QUESTION 7 · 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 reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

442. Eisenhower 442; Stevenson 89.

AP students should know the 442-89 split.

QUESTION 2

Checkers.

AP students should know the dog's name.

QUESTION 3

Eisenhower was famous as a WWII general. Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (1943-45). Organized June 6, 1944 D-Day invasion. Army Chief of Staff (1945-48). Columbia University president (1948-50). First NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe (1950-52).

AP students should know Eisenhower's background.

QUESTION 4

The Checkers speech demonstrated television's power in five structural ways: (1) Mass audience reach - ~60M viewers + millions radio = ~2/3 U.S. adult population. (2) Direct candidate-to-voter communication. (3) Emotional intimacy through television close-ups. (4) Effective scandal management - Nixon converted embarrassing financial story into sympathetic personal narrative. (5) Bypass of hostile media. Structural precursor to later televised political defenses.

AP students should be able to articulate the significance.

QUESTION 5

Nixon's "regardless of what they say about it" line uses three rhetorical strategies: (1) Defiance against critics. (2) Family-protective masculinity. (3) Plain-spoken decisiveness. The line shifted the political narrative from "did Nixon misuse a political fund?" to "should the Nixon daughters be allowed to keep their dog?" Politically masterful.

AP students should be able to articulate the strategy.

QUESTION 6

Eisenhower's "Modern Republicanism" framework was acceptance of the New Deal welfare state combined with fiscal conservatism and Cold War internationalism. Core elements: (1) Acceptance of major New Deal programs (Social Security, Wagner Act, FDIC, Securities and Exchange Commission, etc.). Eisenhower did not attempt to repeal them. He actually expanded Social Security (1954 amendments added 10M more workers). (2) Creation of Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (April 1953). (3) Fiscal conservatism - balanced budgets in 3 of 8 years; restrained federal spending. (4) Cold War internationalism - NATO commitment, foreign aid, covert operations. (5) Civil rights moderation - federal troops at Little Rock 1957 to enforce desegregation, but personal reservations about Brown decision. The framework shaped 1950s-60s U.S. politics in three ways: (a) Established Republican acceptance of the welfare state - structural conservative reversal would not come until Reagan 1980. (b) Provided structural continuity through the 1960s - JFK (1961-63), LBJ (1963-69), and Nixon (1969-74) all operated within similar frameworks. (c) Created the "consensus politics" of the post-WWII era that would shatter in the late 1960s through civil rights, Vietnam, and counterculture.

AP students should be able to articulate the Modern Republicanism framework.

QUESTION 7

Eisenhower states (39): New England + Mid-Atlantic + Midwest + Mountain West + West Coast + 4 Southern states (FL, TN, TX, VA). Stevenson states (9): Deep South (AL, AR, GA, LA, MS, NC, SC) + KY + WV. The 1952 4-state Southern breakthrough reveals: (1) First significant Republican Southern penetration since 1928 Hoover. 1952 was structural Republican Southern victory based on Eisenhower's personal appeal. (2) The 4 breakthrough states were "Outer South" - less Deep South in racial politics, more economically developed. (3) Foreshadowed 1960s realignment: 1964 Goldwater Deep South; 1968 Wallace + Nixon entire South; 1972 Nixon all 50 states. (4) Structural lesson: a war-hero candidate can break partisan loyalties that would otherwise persist.

AP students should be able to articulate the significance.

Discussion prompts

1. Eisenhower's 1952 victory ended 20 years of Democratic presidents. Identify three structural reasons the Truman administration's political vulnerabilities favored a Republican Eisenhower victory.

2. Eisenhower's 4-state Southern breakthrough (FL, TN, TX, VA) was the first significant Republican Southern penetration since 1928. Identify three structural reasons the 1952 breakthrough foreshadowed the 1960s Republican Southern realignment.