1968

Richard Nixon vs Hubert Humphrey

A 35-minute lesson on the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Cold War Realignment	ELECTORAL VOTES 538 total
WINNER Richard Nixon (Republican) · 301 EV	RUNNER-UP Hubert Humphrey (Democratic) · 191 EV
KEY ISSUE Vietnam War; civil unrest and riots; law and order; Nixon's 'Silent Majority'	TURNOUT 62.5%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1968: Richard Nixon vs Hubert Humphrey

Timing

5 min **Warm-up**

When a country has many big problems all at once, people often look for a leader who promises to bring order and end the fighting. What might make voters trust that promise?

15 min **Reading**

The 1968 election was the most chaotic of the postwar era. America was being torn apart by three different crises happening at the same time.

The first crisis was the Vietnam War. The United States had been fighting in Vietnam since 1965. By 1968 more than half a million American soldiers were there. The fighting was on TV every night, and the dead and wounded were rising. The Tet Offensive in January 1968 - a massive Communist attack across South Vietnam - shocked Americans who had been told the war was nearly won. Public support for the war collapsed in February. President Lyndon Johnson, watching his approval rating fall to 36 percent, stunned the country in March by announcing he would not run for re-election.

The second crisis was civil rights. The 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act had ended legal segregation, but the underlying inequalities remained. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968. More than 100 American cities had riots in the days that followed. The unrest exposed how fragile the gains of the civil rights movement still were.

The third crisis was within the Democratic Party. With Johnson out, the front-runner became his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, who was tied to Johnson's Vietnam policy. Senator Robert Kennedy of New York was the anti-war Democrat with the broadest popular appeal. Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, immediately after winning the California primary. The party convention in Chicago in August was a disaster: anti-war delegates fought party regulars on the floor while Chicago police clubbed anti-war protesters in the streets. The television coverage was devastating.

The Republicans nominated former Vice President Richard Nixon, who had lost to Kennedy in 1960 and to California Governor Pat Brown in 1962. Nixon ran on a promise of "law and order" and a vague pledge that he had a "secret plan" to end the Vietnam War. The third major candidate was former Alabama Governor George Wallace, a segregationist running as the candidate of the new American Independent Party. Wallace appealed to Southern white voters alienated from the national Democratic Party and to working-class Northern voters worried about urban crime and racial integration.

		When the votes were counted, Nixon won 301 electoral votes, Humphrey 191, Wallace 46. The popular vote was much closer - Nixon won by just 0.7 percent. The map showed the Democratic coalition that Roosevelt had built in 1932 fracturing. Wallace carried five Deep South states that had been reliably Democratic for a century. Nixon's 1968 victory began what scholars now call the conservative realignment that would reshape American politics for the next forty years.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1968 Election

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Key words

Vietnam War	The long Cold War conflict in Vietnam (1965-1973 for the U.S.). More than 58,000 American soldiers died. The war divided the country sharply by 1968.
Tet Offensive	A massive Communist attack across South Vietnam in January 1968. It shocked Americans who had been told the war was nearly won. Public support for the war collapsed after Tet.
Civil Rights Act of 1964	The federal law that outlawed discrimination by race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Combined with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it ended legal segregation in the South.
American Independent Party	The third party George Wallace ran under in 1968. It appealed to white Southerners and conservative Northerners alienated from the national Democratic Party. Wallace won 46 electoral votes and 13.5 percent of the popular vote.
Law and order	Nixon's 1968 campaign slogan. It promised to crack down on urban crime, anti-war protests, and the chaos of the late 1960s. Critics called it a coded appeal to white voters worried about civil rights.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Richard Nixon receive in 1968?

( ) A. 237
( ) B. 301
( ) C. 385
( ) D. 486

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Lyndon Johnson announce in March 1968 that he would not run for re-election?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Who were the three main candidates in 1968, and which party did each represent?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did George Wallace win five Southern states that had been Democratic for a century?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

301. Nixon 301; Humphrey 191; Wallace 46. The popular margin was much closer (Nixon 43.4%, Humphrey 42.7%, Wallace 13.5%).

Wallace's 46 electoral votes came from five Deep South states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi. He also picked up 1 faithless elector from North Carolina.

QUESTION 2

Johnson's approval rating had collapsed after the Tet Offensive in January 1968 showed the public that the Vietnam War was far from won. Senator Eugene McCarthy nearly defeated Johnson in the New Hampshire primary in March, signaling Johnson could not unify his own party. On March 31 he announced he would not run for re-election.

Johnson's decision is the central pivot of 1968. Without his withdrawal, no Robert Kennedy challenge, no Chicago convention chaos, no Humphrey nomination, no Wallace breakthrough.

QUESTION 3

Richard Nixon (Republican), former Vice President. Hubert Humphrey (Democrat), the incumbent Vice President. George Wallace (American Independent Party), former Governor of Alabama.

Three-way races are rare in U.S. presidential elections. The 1968 contest is the most consequential three-way race of the twentieth century because Wallace's coalition presaged the South's Republican realignment.

QUESTION 4

Wallace had been the segregationist governor of Alabama. The five Deep South states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi) had been reliably Democratic since the Civil War, but the national Democratic Party had pushed through the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act. Many white Southerners felt the national Democratic Party had abandoned them and voted for Wallace as a protest.

The five-state breakaway was a one-time party realignment in slow motion. Most of these states would vote Republican in every subsequent presidential election, completing the South's switch to the GOP by 1980.