1968

Richard Nixon vs Hubert Humphrey

A 50-minute lesson on the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

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1968: Richard Nixon vs Hubert Humphrey

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 situations in which a political party might find itself unable to unite around a single nominee. For each, suggest one reform a party might adopt to prevent the disunity from happening again.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1968 election was the most chaotic of the postwar era. By August of that year, three separate crises had converged in ways no political system was designed to handle. The first was the Vietnam War. The U.S. had been escalating in Vietnam since 1965 under President Lyndon Johnson. By the end of 1967 there were 485,000 American troops in country and 16,000 had died. The January 30, 1968, Tet Offensive - a coordinated North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attack on more than a hundred South Vietnamese cities - was militarily a U.S. victory (the attackers were eventually pushed back with heavy losses), but politically a catastrophe. Walter Cronkite, the most-watched evening news anchor, told viewers in February that the war was unwinnable. Johnson reportedly said, "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America." His approval rating fell to 36 percent. The second crisis was within the Democratic Party. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota challenged Johnson in the March 12 New Hampshire primary and nearly defeated the sitting president (Johnson won 49.6 to 41.9 percent). Four days later, Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York entered the race as an anti-war alternative. On March 31, Johnson stunned the country by announcing he would not seek re-election. Kennedy went on to win five of six primaries he entered. After winning the California primary on June 4, he was assassinated in a Los Angeles hotel by Sirhan Sirhan. McCarthy could not lock down the nomination; Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who had not entered a single primary, became the front-runner through control of the party machinery. The third crisis was civil rights. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on April 4. More than 100 American cities had riots in the days that followed. The unrest underscored that the legal victories of the civil rights movement had not translated into economic equality.

The August Democratic Convention in Chicago was a televised disaster. Anti-war delegates fought party regulars on the floor while Mayor Richard J. Daley's police clubbed protesters in the streets outside. The convention nominated Humphrey, who was tied to Johnson's Vietnam policy. The party emerged divided, demoralized, and trailing in the polls.

The Republicans nominated former Vice President Richard Nixon, who had lost to Kennedy in 1960. Nixon's 1968 campaign was disciplined and aimed at what he called the silent majority - voters who were not in the streets and were tired of disorder. He promised law and order at home, an honorable peace abroad, and a slowdown of federal interventions in race relations. His campaign carefully avoided specifics on Vietnam, claiming only a secret plan.

The third major candidate was former Alabama Governor George Wallace, running under the new American Independent Party. Wallace was an explicit segregationist whose campaign appealed to Southern whites alienated from the national Democratic Party and to working-class Northern whites worried about urban crime, school busing, and racial integration. His running mate Curtis LeMay was the former Air Force chief of staff who had publicly discussed using nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

Nixon won 301 electoral votes to Humphrey's 191 and Wallace's 46. The popular margin was 0.7 percent (43.4% to 42.7%) - one of the closest in U.S. history. Wallace carried five Deep South states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi) that had been reliably Democratic since the 1870s. The map showed the Roosevelt coalition fracturing. Most of those Wallace states would never vote Democratic in a presidential race again. Nixon's 1968 victory began what scholars now call the conservative realignment that would reshape American politics for the next forty years.

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

Tet Offensive

The coordinated January 1968 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attack on more than a hundred South Vietnamese cities. A military loss for the attackers but a political catastrophe for the Johnson administration; collapsed U.S. domestic support for the Vietnam War.

Law and order

Nixon's 1968 campaign theme. Promised crackdowns on urban crime, anti-war protests, and campus disorder. Critics described it as a coded appeal to white voters anxious about civil rights and integration.

McCarthy primary challenge

Senator Eugene McCarthy's 1968 anti-war Democratic primary campaign against incumbent Johnson. Nearly defeating Johnson in New Hampshire forced Johnson to abandon his re-election.

Silent majority

Nixon's 1968 phrase for voters who supported the war and opposed urban unrest but did not march in protests. Became a durable American political concept used by every Republican strategist since.

American Independent Party

The 1968 third party George Wallace ran under. 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.

Conservative realignment

The durable shift of working-class whites, Southern voters, and suburbanites toward the Republican Party that began in 1968 and consolidated under Reagan in 1980. Reversed the Roosevelt coalition's dominance.

Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention

RICHARD NIXON, AUGUST 8, 1968

Nixon delivered this acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach. The address was carefully calibrated to project competence and order in contrast to the unrest of the Democratic primary fight and the urban riots of April. The "forgotten Americans" passage became one of the most quoted formulations of Nixon's political appeal.

> *"As we look at America, we see cities enveloped in smoke and flame. We hear sirens in the night. We see Americans dying on distant battlefields abroad. We see Americans hating each other; fighting each other; killing each other at home. And as we see and hear these things, millions of Americans cry out in anguish: Did we come all this way for this? Did American boys die in Normandy, and Korea, and in Valley Forge for this? Listen to the answer to those questions. It is another voice. It is a quiet voice in the tumult of the shouting. It is the voice of the great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators."*

Nixon, "Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention" (Miami Beach, FL, August 8, 1968). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 1968 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did George Wallace win in 1968?

( ) A. 12
( ) B. 31
( ) C. 46
( ) D. 73

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which event in March 1968 led Lyndon Johnson to announce he would not seek re-election?

( ) A. The Tet Offensive
( ) B. Robert Kennedy entering the race
( ) C. The Chicago riots
( ) D. The Memphis sanitation strike

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the two political assassinations of 1968 and the specific dates each occurred.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was the Democratic National Convention in Chicago a political disaster for the Democratic Party?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Nixon names "the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators" in the excerpt. In two sentences, explain what political message he was sending and who his target audience was.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1968 election map, identify the five states George Wallace carried. What pattern do they share, and why was this pattern historically significant?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

46. Wallace won 46 electoral votes: Alabama (10), Arkansas (6), Georgia (12), Louisiana (10), Mississippi (7) plus 1 faithless North Carolina elector.

Wallace is the last third-party candidate to win electoral votes in a U.S. presidential election. His 13.5 percent popular share remains a postwar high for a third-party candidate.

QUESTION 2

Robert Kennedy entering the race. The actual sequence: New Hampshire primary near-loss (March 12) ’ Robert Kennedy enters (March 16) ’ Johnson withdraws (March 31). The Tet Offensive (January) was the underlying cause; Kennedy's entrance was the political trigger.

The historical record is unambiguous. Johnson's aides confirmed the Kennedy challenge was decisive. Johnson's March 31 address explicitly cited the country needing a leader untied to factional politics.

QUESTION 3

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York was assassinated in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968, immediately after winning the California Democratic primary.

The two assassinations bracket the 1968 spring. King's death triggered the urban riots in April; Kennedy's death effectively handed the Democratic nomination to Humphrey.

QUESTION 4

Inside the convention hall, anti-war delegates fought party regulars on the floor. Outside, Chicago Mayor Daley's police clubbed anti-war protesters in front of national television cameras. The convention nominated Humphrey, who was tied to Johnson's Vietnam policy, without his having entered any primary. The party emerged publicly divided, with the visible chaos confirming Nixon's law-and-order narrative.

The Chicago convention is the textbook case study of how a televised party meltdown shapes a general election. The McGovern-Fraser Commission reformed the primary system after 1968 specifically to prevent a recurrence.

QUESTION 5

Nixon was contrasting his target voter - quiet, working- and middle-class, frustrated with the visible disorder of 1968 - with the visible protesters of the era. The audience was working-class and middle-class whites who were not in the streets and not on television but who were watching the country fracture. The forgotten Americans framing became one of the most durable rhetorical tropes in postwar Republican politics.

The 1969 silent majority speech reused the same framing. Reagan in 1980, Trump in 2016, every cycle since echoes the same structure.

QUESTION 6

Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi - all in the Deep South. Historically these states had been reliably Democratic since Reconstruction (the Solid South). Wallace's 1968 breakaway was the first crack in the Democratic monopoly on the Deep South. Most of those states would never vote Democratic for president again.

The Solid South's collapse is one of the most important demographic shifts in twentieth-century American politics. The 1968 result is the first electoral evidence of the realignment that would consolidate under Reagan in 1980.