1968

Richard Nixon vs Hubert Humphrey

A 75-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%

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

1968: Richard Nixon vs Hubert Humphrey

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 1968 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1968 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: list two ways a single year could reshape a political party's coalition. Then identify one external event (war, assassination, recession) that you think most often drives such change.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1968 election unfolded against a backdrop of national crisis: the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, urban uprisings, and the chaotic Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Richard Nixon, who had narrowly lost in 1960, won the presidency over Democrat Hubert Humphrey by 301 electoral votes to 191. Alabama Governor George Wallace, running on the American Independent ticket as an explicit segregationist, carried five Deep South states and 46 electoral votes — the most successful third-party performance since 1912. Nixon's popular-vote margin over Humphrey was the narrowest since 1888 (43.4 to 42.7 percent). The election ended the New Deal coalition: the Solid South broke decisively, the white working class began drifting Republican, and Republican strategists began designing the long-running Southern Strategy. 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 1968 election tells you about the Cold War Realignment 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

Tet Offensive
A January 1968 coordinated North Vietnamese / Viet Cong attack on more than 100 South Vietnamese cities. Tactically a U.S. victory but a political catastrophe — it shattered "light at the end of the tunnel" claims.

Southern Strategy
Republican electoral approach beginning in the late 1960s of appealing to white Southern voters' anxieties about civil rights to break the Democratic Solid South.

American Independent Party
George Wallace's 1968 vehicle, formed to carry segregationist voters outside the Democratic Party after the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Won 46 electoral votes across five Deep South states — the most successful third-party result since 1912.

New Deal coalition
The Democratic alliance built by FDR — union members, African Americans, Southern whites, urban ethnic voters, intellectuals. 1968 broke it apart along civil-rights and Vietnam lines.

Convention chaos
The 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, marked by violent clashes between antiwar protesters and police outside the hall and contested rules fights inside.

Antiwar movement
The broad U.S. opposition to the Vietnam War, including campus protests, draft resistance, and the McCarthy/Kennedy insurgent campaigns within the Democratic Party in early 1968.

Address to the Nation (closing remarks)

LYNDON B. JOHNSON, MARCH 31, 1968

Johnson had been expected to seek a second full term. The speech began as a Vietnam policy address; the surprise withdrawal announcement came in the closing minutes, blindsiding even most of his own staff.

> *"With America's sons in the fields far away, with America's future under challenge right here at home, with our hopes and the world's hopes for peace in the balance every day, I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes or to any duties other than the awesome duties of this office—the Presidency of your country. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President."*

Johnson, "Address to the Nation Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam" (Washington, DC, March 31, 1968). Public domain.

The 1968 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 George Wallace win in 1968?

( ) A. 0
( ) B. 14
( ) C. 46
( ) D. 92

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Name the five Deep South states Wallace carried in 1968.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which incumbent declined to seek re-election in 1968?

( ) A. John F. Kennedy
( ) B. Lyndon B. Johnson
( ) C. Hubert Humphrey
( ) D. Eugene McCarthy

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain in two sentences why Hubert Humphrey, sitting Vice President of a Democratic administration, struggled to consolidate the Democratic base in 1968.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

On the 1968 map, identify two states that voted Democratic in 1964 but Republican (or Wallace) in 1968. What broader regional shift do they represent?

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the exact phrase in the excerpt where Johnson announces he will not seek the presidency in 1968. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

Johnson pairs his withdrawal with a Vietnam policy announcement. Explain in two sentences how delivering both together shaped how the news was received compared to a stand-alone withdrawal speech.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

46

Wallace won 46 electoral votes — the largest third-party haul since Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose run in 1912. He also won 13.5 percent of the popular vote.

QUESTION 2

Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia.

Wallace also came close in South Carolina and Tennessee. His base was the segregationist white South that had voted Democratic from 1880 through 1960.

QUESTION 3

Lyndon B. Johnson

Johnson announced on March 31, 1968 that he would not seek another term, citing the deepening Vietnam crisis. His withdrawal opened the Democratic field to Robert Kennedy, Eugene McCarthy, and ultimately Hubert Humphrey.

QUESTION 4

Humphrey was tied to LBJ's Vietnam policy, which had split the Democratic Party. Antiwar Democrats had backed McCarthy or Kennedy and many never reconciled with Humphrey, who only broke publicly with Johnson's war stance in late September.

Humphrey closed the gap rapidly in October after his Salt Lake City speech announcing a bombing-pause position, but it came too late to fully reunify the coalition.

QUESTION 5

Acceptable answers include: Florida (LBJ in 1964, Nixon in 1968), Tennessee (LBJ in 1964, Nixon in 1968), Arkansas (LBJ in 1964, Wallace in 1968), Louisiana (LBJ in 1964, Wallace in 1968). The pattern reveals the collapse of Solid South Democratic loyalty.

The shift was the beginning of the Republican Southern Strategy realignment, completed in 1972 and 1980. By 1968 the Solid South was already three-way fractured.

QUESTION 6

Accept: "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President" — or any verbatim subset that names the refusal to seek or accept.

The full phrasing repeats both verbs deliberately so neither a draft nor a primary insurgency could plausibly bring him back.

QUESTION 7

Accept any of: (1) pairing the withdrawal with the bombing-halt announcement reframed Johnson's exit as a peace gesture rather than a defeat; (2) it forced cable and front-page coverage to lead with the Vietnam policy shift, softening domestic perception of failure; (3) it neutralized opposition within his own administration to a phased de-escalation, because his political career was no longer at stake.

Doris Kearns Goodwin and Robert Caro both argue Johnson made the decision weeks earlier but delayed announcement until it could be coupled with a policy gesture. Press coverage the next morning led with the Vietnam announcement, not the withdrawal.

Discussion prompts

1. George Wallace won 46 electoral votes on an explicit segregationist platform. What does the size of his support tell you about the limits of the 1964 civil rights consensus, and how did the major parties respond in the years that followed?

2. The Democratic Convention in Chicago featured nationally televised police violence against antiwar protesters. Identify one short-term and one long-term effect this had on the Democratic Party.

3. The 1968 election is often described as the end of the New Deal coalition. Identify two specific demographic or regional shifts that occurred, and one that did not happen until later cycles.