AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1968

Richard Nixon vs Hubert Humphrey

A 105-minute lesson on the 1968 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

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2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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1968: Richard Nixon vs Hubert Humphrey

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural changes in American political life that crystallized in 1968 and persist today. For each, identify the specific 1968 event most responsible for it.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1968 election is the textbook case of a critical realignment in slow motion. Three independent crises converged in twelve weeks to break the Democratic majority that Roosevelt had built in 1932 and that had elected six of the previous nine presidents. The Republican coalition that Nixon assembled in 1968 - the silent majority of working-class whites, Southerners, and suburbanites - would consolidate under Reagan in 1980 and dominate national politics for the next four decades. The first crisis was Vietnam. The Johnson administration's 1965 escalation had built U.S. troop strength to 485,000 by the end of 1967, with 16,000 dead. The January 30, 1968, Tet Offensive was the inflection point. The military outcome was a U.S. victory; the political outcome was a disaster. Public support for the war collapsed in February. Walter Cronkite's February 27 CBS Evening News editorial declaring the war unwinnable shifted what political scientists call the elite consensus. Eugene McCarthy nearly defeated Johnson in the March 12 New Hampshire primary. Robert Kennedy entered the race on March 16. On March 31 Johnson announced he would not seek re-election. The second crisis was civil rights. The Kerner Commission report on the 1967 urban riots, released February 29, 1968, warned that America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal." Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on April 4. Riots erupted in 110 American cities. The legal victories of the civil rights movement had not produced economic equality, and the urban unrest of 1965-1968 exposed the gap. The third crisis was inside the Democratic Party. Robert Kennedy won the California primary on June 4 and was assassinated that night. McCarthy lacked the delegate count to win the nomination. Hubert Humphrey, who had not entered a single primary, became the front-runner through control of the party machinery - delegates appointed by state party leaders rather than chosen in primaries. The August Democratic Convention in Chicago was a televised catastrophe: anti-war delegates fought party regulars on the floor while Mayor Daley's police clubbed protesters in the streets

outside. The McGovern-Fraser Commission, created after the convention, reformed the primary system to require primaries or open caucuses for delegate selection - a reform that has shaped every subsequent presidential nomination contest.

The Republican nominee was Richard Nixon, eight years removed from his 1960 loss to Kennedy. Nixon's campaign was disciplined and strategically vague: law and order at home, an honorable peace abroad, and a slowdown of federal interventions in race relations. He maintained a Vietnam ambiguity (claiming a secret plan he never described) that allowed both hawks and doves to project their preferences onto him. We now know that Nixon's campaign secretly contacted the South Vietnamese government through Anna Chennault, urging it to refuse to negotiate before the election. Johnson's administration intercepted the communications and the FBI confirmed them, but Johnson chose not to disclose them publicly. The Chennault Affair remains one of the most contested examples of campaign interference in U.S. history.

The third major candidate was former Alabama Governor George Wallace, running under the American Independent Party. Wallace was an explicit segregationist whose campaign appealed to white Southerners 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, the former Air Force chief of staff, had publicly discussed using nuclear weapons in Vietnam.

On election day 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%). Wallace carried five Deep South states (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi). Most of those states would never vote Democratic for president again. The Roosevelt coalition that had elected every Democratic president since 1932 was broken; in its place was a new Republican coalition built on race, region, and reaction against the visible disorder of 1968.

Historians treat 1968 as a partial realignment that completed under Reagan in 1980. The Democratic Party retained Congress until 1994, but the GOP would win seven of the next ten presidential elections. The conservative coalition Nixon assembled - the silent majority of working- and middle-class whites alienated from cultural left politics - became the structural basis of American conservatism through 2024.

20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.

5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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 30, 1968, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attack on more than a hundred South Vietnamese cities. Militarily a U.S. victory but politically the moment American public support for the war collapsed.

Silent majority
Nixon's 1968 term for voters who were not in the streets, not on television, and were tired of the visible disorder of the late 1960s. Became one of the most durable American political concepts of the postwar era.

Kerner Commission
The Johnson-appointed commission whose February 1968 report blamed the 1967 urban riots on white racism and warned that America was "moving toward two societies, one black, one white - separate and unequal."

Solid South
The reliably Democratic vote of the eleven former Confederate states from Reconstruction through 1948. The Wallace breakaway in 1968 was the first crack in the Solid South; by 1980 the South was reliably Republican in presidential races.

Forgotten Americans
Nixon's 1968 Republican Convention acceptance-speech phrase for the constituency he sought to mobilize - the working- and middle-class whites who were not in the protests, not on television, and were tired of disorder. Synonymous with the silent majority.

McGovern-Fraser Commission
The post-1968 Democratic Party reform commission that required primaries or open caucuses for delegate selection. Shifted nomination power from party leaders to voters and reshaped every subsequent presidential nomination contest.

Chennault Affair
The 1968 covert Nixon campaign communication with the South Vietnamese government urging it to refuse to negotiate with the U.S. before the election. Intercepted by the Johnson administration but not publicly disclosed. One of the most contested examples of campaign interference in U.S. history.

Critical realignment
A presidential election that produces a durable shift in partisan coalitions, lasting one or more generations. 1968 is the textbook case of partial realignment that completed under Reagan in 1980.

Hawks and doves
The pro-war (hawks) and anti-war (doves) factions of American foreign-policy debate during Vietnam. Nixon's strategic Vietnam ambiguity in 1968 allowed both factions to project their preferences onto him.

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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Acceptance Speech at the Republican National Convention

RICHARD NIXON, AUGUST 8, 1968

“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.

SOURCE B

Address to the Nation Announcing Steps to Limit the War in Vietnam

LYNDON B. JOHNSON, MARCH 31, 1968

“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

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Nixon's acceptance speech) that defines his target constituency as a non-protesting majority. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Johnson's withdrawal address) that frames Johnson's departure as service to country rather than political calculation. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both speeches address the 1968 crisis, but they characterize it differently. Identify the specific framing each source uses.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was delivered in March; Source A in August. What does the five-month gap tell you about how the political character of the 1968 crisis evolved across the year?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A names "Americans dying on distant battlefields abroad" alongside domestic unrest. Identify one specific 1968 event that connected the war and the urban crisis in voters' minds, and explain the connection.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1968 covert Nixon-campaign action remains one of the most contested examples of presidential-campaign interference in U.S. history?

( ) A. The Chennault Affair
( ) B. The Plumbers operation
( ) C. The Saturday Night Massacre
( ) D. The Pentagon Papers

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The McGovern-Fraser Commission, created after the 1968 Democratic Convention, reformed:

( ) A. Federal campaign finance
( ) B. Presidential nomination procedures
( ) C. Electoral College rules
( ) D. House delegate apportionment

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1968 realignment primarily about Vietnam, civil rights backlash, or Democratic Party breakdown? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Johnson's withdrawal speech (Source B, March 1968) presents the Democratic crisis as Vietnam-driven and personal. Nixon's acceptance speech (Source A, August 1968) presents the same crisis as a broader civilizational breakdown requiring law-and-order restoration. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1965-1972 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1968 realignment was primarily a referendum on Vietnam, primarily a backlash against the civil rights movement and urban unrest, or primarily a verdict on the Democratic Party's loss of internal cohesion. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position selecting one primary driver. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Tet Offensive, the King assassination, the Kennedy assassination, the Chicago convention, the Wallace candidacy. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent - one driver as primary rather than three equally weighted - and defend the selection. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "the forgotten Americans, the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators", "the great majority of Americans", "It is a quiet voice in the tumult of the shouting". The "forgotten Americans" phrase is the most explicit.

The forgotten-Americans framing became the standard rhetorical template for Republican mobilization for the next four decades. AP students should recognize it as a constructed political identity, not a natural demographic.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "I do not believe that I should devote an hour or a day of my time to any personal partisan causes", "any duties other than the awesome duties of this office", "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party". The withdrawal sentence is the most quoted.

Johnson's framing positions him as setting aside personal ambition for national service. The strategic ambiguity left open whether his presidency had failed or whether circumstance had simply demanded his sacrifice.

QUESTION 3

Source A treats the crisis as a civilizational breakdown - cities in flames, citizens at war with each other - that requires order-restoration leadership. Source B treats the crisis as Vietnam-specific and presidentially personal - the war's demands exceed what one president can handle alongside political campaigning. The first framing demands a new kind of leader; the second framing concedes that the current leader has reached his limit.

The two framings produce different political responses: Source A calls for ideological reorientation, Source B calls for personal withdrawal. AP students should recognize these as politically incompatible diagnoses.

QUESTION 4

In March the crisis was Vietnam-shaped and Johnson-shaped. By August, after King's assassination, the urban riots, Robert Kennedy's assassination, and the Chicago convention disaster, the crisis was generalized - no longer about one war or one president but about whether the American political order could hold together at all. Nixon's August framing reflects the broader crisis; Johnson's March framing reflects only its earliest layer. The five-month gap reveals how rapidly a Vietnam-specific political problem expanded into a generalized crisis of governance.

The temporal expansion of the crisis is one of the key analytical points about 1968. Students should be able to trace the broadening of the political diagnosis across the year.

QUESTION 5

Accept any of: (1) The Tet Offensive (January) - U.S. soldiers visibly dying abroad and the war's unwinnability sapped political authority for any government response. (2) The disproportionate Black combat fatalities in Vietnam connecting the war to civil rights inequity. (3) Robert Kennedy's campaign explicitly framing Vietnam and urban poverty as connected problems of federal priority. (4) The Black Power movement positioning Black soldiers as fighting for a country that did not extend full citizenship to them.

AP students should be able to show how Vietnam and civil rights were not separate issues in 1968 but increasingly perceived as connected. The Source A framing makes this connection explicit.

QUESTION 6

The Chennault Affair. The Nixon campaign secretly communicated with the South Vietnamese government, urging it to refuse to negotiate with the U.S. before the election. Johnson intercepted the messages and the FBI confirmed them, but Johnson chose not to disclose them publicly.

The Chennault Affair has been confirmed by both Nixon's 1968 campaign records and Johnson administration intercepts. It remains the highest-stakes campaign interference allegation of the postwar era.

QUESTION 7

Presidential nomination procedures.

The McGovern-Fraser Commission required primaries or open caucuses for delegate selection. The reform shifted nomination power from party leaders to voters and reshaped every subsequent presidential nomination contest.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) select one primary driver (Vietnam, civil rights backlash, or party breakdown), (2) defend that selection rather than treating all three as equally weighted, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric on the next page evaluates the full essay.