3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1972

Richard Nixon vs George McGovern

A 35-minute lesson on the 1972 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) · 520 EV	RUNNER-UP George McGovern (Democratic) · 17 EV
KEY ISSUE Vietnam War wind-down; Watergate (emerging); détente with USSR and China	TURNOUT 56.2%

CONTENTS

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

1972: Richard Nixon vs George McGovern

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a president wins a 49-state landslide but resigns in disgrace two years later, what does that reveal about the relationship between electoral success and political survival?
15 min	**Reading**	1972 election was 47th U.S. presidential election. Produced Richard M. Nixon's 520-17 EV victory over Democrat George McGovern - one of biggest electoral landslides in U.S. history. Nixon's 60.7% popular vote second-highest since 1820 (after LBJ 1964 61.1%). 1972 election structurally shaped by Vietnam War winding down, détente with China and Soviet Union, McGovern Commission reforms transforming Democratic primary system, Eagleton affair, and Watergate burglary 8 months before Election Day. Political conditions had been transformed by Nixon's first-term governance. 1969-72 Nixon achievements: (1) October 1969 began Vietnam troop withdrawal. U.S. troop levels declined from 543,000 (April 1969) to ~25,000 (November 1972). (2) July 20, 1969 Apollo 11 Moon landing - achievement of JFK's 1961 commitment. (3) December 2, 1970 EPA founding. (4) January 1970 National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) signed. (5) February 1972 Nixon's historic visit to China - first U.S. president to visit People's Republic of China. Met with Chairman Mao Zedong. (6) May 26, 1972 SALT I Treaty signed in Moscow with Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev. ABM Treaty + Interim Agreement on Offensive Nuclear Weapons. First major U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement. (7) August 15, 1971 wage and price controls announced + closure of gold window (end of Bretton Woods system). (8) Détente policy with Soviet Union and China (the "triangular diplomacy" framework). Domestic conditions: economic prosperity continuing (GDP growth ~5%/year); employment 5%; consumer confidence high. Inflation rising (5%/year) - foreshadowing 1970s stagflation. Republican National Convention met in Miami August 21-23, 1972 and renominated Nixon-Agnew by acclamation. The convention was a structural celebration of Nixon's achievements. Republican slogan: "Now more than ever" + "Four more years." Democratic Party had been transformed by the 1968 Convention chaos (Chicago police riot during Vietnam War protests) and subsequent McGovern Commission reforms. The McGovern-Fraser Commission (1969-71) had rewritten Democratic primary rules to: (1) Require state delegations to reflect demographic composition (women, minorities, youth). (2) Replace party-boss-controlled selection with primary elections and open caucuses. (3) Reduce the role of "superdelegates" (party offi-

cials). The reforms structurally transformed the Democratic Party from machine-controlled to grassroots-driven nomination process. McGovern himself benefitted from the reforms - his anti-war coalition (youth, minorities, women) was politically mobilized under the new rules.

Democratic National Convention met in Miami July 10-13, 1972. McGovern won the nomination on the first ballot. Sen Thomas Eagleton of Missouri (42, Catholic, moderate Democrat) was selected as VP after McGovern had considered ~9 alternatives. The Convention's schedule was chaotic - acceptance speeches did not begin until 2:48 AM Eastern Time on July 14, after most TV viewers had gone to bed.

The Eagleton affair July-August 1972 was structurally devastating. July 25 press revealed Eagleton had been hospitalized three times in 1960s for depression and had received electroshock therapy. McGovern initially defended Eagleton: "I am 1000 percent for Tom Eagleton, and I have no intention of dropping him from the ticket." July 31, 1972 McGovern announced Eagleton was withdrawing. Sargent Shriver (JFK's brother-in-law, Peace Corps founder, ambassador to France 1968-70) replaced Eagleton August 8, 1972. The affair damaged McGovern's political credibility.

McGovern was 50, Air Force WWII bomber pilot (35 missions over Europe; Distinguished Flying Cross), History PhD (Northwestern 1953), South Dakota senator since 1963, leading anti-war voice. He proposed: amnesty for Vietnam draft resisters; immediate Vietnam withdrawal; cuts to defense spending; abolition of grand juries; "demogrant" - $1,000 minimum annual income for every American. The "demogrant" proposal was politically devastating: it was attacked as socialistic and unaffordable. McGovern eventually withdrew the proposal.

Nixon framed McGovern as "acid, amnesty, and abortion" - representing 1960s counterculture excess. The framing was politically effective with the "silent majority" of working-class white voters Nixon had cultivated since 1968.

June 17, 1972 - five months before Election Day - five burglars were caught at Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate complex in Washington DC. The burglars: James W. McCord Jr. (former CIA and FBI agent, then security director for Committee to Re-elect the President - CREEP); Bernard Barker; Virgilio Gonzalez; Eugenio Martinez; Frank Sturgis (Cuban exile, anti-Castro operative). Police found bugging equipment, cameras, and lock-picking tools. The press initially treated the burglary as a bizarre incident. The Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein began investigating. Their reporting (with anonymous source "Deep Throat" - later revealed as FBI Associate Director Mark Felt) gradually revealed the burglars' connection to CREEP and the Nixon White House cover-up. But the full scope was not yet clear before the November 1972 election.

The Nixon campaign's structural advantages: (1) Strong economy + Vietnam withdrawal + China opening + Soviet détente. (2) McGovern's perceived radicalism.

(3) Eagleton affair damage. (4) Watergate not yet a clear scandal. (5) Republican fundraising approximately $61.4M vs Democratic $34.7M.

Nixon won 520 electoral votes to McGovern's 17. Nixon carried 49 states; McGovern carried 1 state (Massachusetts) + DC. The popular vote: Nixon 47,168,710 (60.7%); McGovern 29,173,222 (37.5%); minor candidates ~1.4M. Nixon-McGovern popular-vote margin: 17,995,488 - one of biggest in U.S. history.

The geographic pattern was structurally extreme. Nixon swept every region: Northeast (except MA), Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, South (including all 11 former Confederate states - first Republican carrying of entire South since 1872; completing the Southern realignment that Goldwater 1964 had inaugurated), Mountain West, West Coast. McGovern's Massachusetts victory was structural: anti-war youth + Catholic immigrants + intellectual academic culture. The "Don't Blame Me, I'm From Massachusetts" bumper sticker became popular in 1973-74 as Watergate unfolded.

But Watergate unfolded 1973-74. (1) Senate Watergate Committee hearings May-August 1973. Chairman Sen Sam Ervin of North Carolina. (2) July 13, 1973 White House aide Alexander Butterfield revealed White House taping system. (3) Saturday Night Massacre October 20, 1973 - Nixon fired Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox; AG Elliot Richardson and Deputy AG William Ruckelshaus resigned rather than fire Cox. (4) Spiro Agnew resigned VP October 10, 1973 over Maryland kickback scandal. Gerald Ford (R-MI) confirmed VP December 6, 1973 - first VP appointed under 25th Amendment. (5) July 24, 1974 US v. Nixon Supreme Court (8-0) ordered tapes turned over. (6) "Smoking gun" tape from June 23, 1972 revealed Nixon had ordered FBI to halt Watergate investigation. (7) July 27-30, 1974 House Judiciary Committee voted three impeachment articles. (8) August 9, 1974 Nixon resigned - only U.S. president to resign. (9) VP Ford became 38th president. (10) September 8, 1974 Ford pardoned Nixon "for all offenses against the United States" during his presidency.

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The McGovern 1972 defeat would shape Democratic Party direction for the next 20 years. The "McGovernite" label became politically toxic - associated with cultural-liberal excess and electoral disaster. Subsequent Democratic candidates (Carter 1976, Mondale 1984, Dukakis 1988, Clinton 1992) would attempt to distance themselves from McGovernite associations through "New Democrat" centrism. The Democratic Leadership Council (DLC, founded 1985) would explicitly position itself against

		McGovernite progressivism. Bill Clinton's 1992 candidacy was structurally rooted in DLC centrism. The 1972 election can be analyzed retrospectively as a peak moment of Republican-conservative ascendance that the Watergate scandal would briefly interrupt. Reagan 1980 would resume the ascendance.
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 1972 Election

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Key words

Richard M. Nixon	37th U.S. president (1969-74). Eisenhower's VP (1953-61). Won 1968 narrowly + 1972 landslide. Resigned August 9, 1974 over Watergate - only U.S. president to resign.
Watergate scandal	1972-74 political scandal. June 17, 1972 burglars at DNC headquarters at Watergate complex. CREEP connection. Nixon White House cover-up exposed 1973-74. Nixon resigned August 9, 1974.
George McGovern	SD Senator (1963-81) and 1972 Democratic presidential nominee. Air Force WWII bomber pilot. Anti-war progressive. Lost 520-17 EV. Carried only Massachusetts + DC.
Eagleton affair	July-August 1972 Democratic VP crisis. Sen Eagleton revealed to have received electroshock therapy for depression. McGovern initially "1000 percent" supportive; July 31 announced Eagleton withdrawal. Shriver replaced August 8.
McGovern Commission reforms	McGovern-Fraser Commission (1969-71) rewrote Democratic primary rules. Required state delegations to reflect demographic composition (women, minorities, youth). Replaced party-boss-controlled selection with primary elections and open caucuses. Structurally transformed Democratic Party.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many states did Nixon win in 1972?

( ) A. 44
( ) B. 46
( ) C. 49
( ) D. 50

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who replaced Eagleton as McGovern's VP nominee?

( ) A. Edmund Muskie
( ) B. Hubert Humphrey
( ) C. Sargent Shriver
( ) D. Walter Mondale

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Watergate scandal?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Nixon's "China opening" and "détente" policies shape his 1972 re-election?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

49. Nixon won 49 of 50 states. McGovern carried only Massachusetts. Nixon 520 EV vs McGovern 17 (14 MA + 3 DC).

AP students should know the 49-state Nixon landslide.

QUESTION 2

Sargent Shriver. JFK's brother-in-law (married Eunice Kennedy 1953). Peace Corps founder + first director 1961. Office of Economic Opportunity director 1964-68 (LBJ Great Society). Ambassador to France 1968-70. Replaced Eagleton August 8, 1972 after Eagleton withdrew July 31, 1972 over electroshock-therapy revelations.

AP students should know Shriver as Eagleton replacement.

QUESTION 3

Watergate was the 1972-74 political scandal that led to Nixon's August 9, 1974 resignation - only U.S. president to resign. Timeline: (1) June 17, 1972 5 burglars caught at DNC headquarters at Watergate complex. (2) Burglars connected to CREEP (Committee to Re-elect the President). (3) Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward + Carl Bernstein investigate through 1972-74. "Deep Throat" anonymous source (later revealed as FBI Associate Director Mark Felt). (4) Senate Watergate Committee hearings May-August 1973. Chairman Sen Sam Ervin (NC). (5) July 13, 1973 Alexander Butterfield revealed White House taping system. (6) October 20, 1973 Saturday Night Massacre - Nixon fired special prosecutor Cox; AG Richardson + Deputy AG Ruckelshaus resigned. (7) October 10, 1973 Agnew resigned over Maryland kickback scandal. (8) December 6, 1973 Gerald Ford confirmed VP - first under 25th Amendment. (9) July 24, 1974 US v. Nixon SCOTUS 8-0 ordered tapes turned over. (10) August 5, 1974 "smoking gun" tape from June 23, 1972 revealed Nixon ordered FBI to halt Watergate investigation. (11) July 27-30, 1974 House Judiciary Committee voted impeachment articles. (12) August 9, 1974 Nixon resigned. (13) September 8, 1974 Ford pardoned Nixon.

AP students should be able to articulate the Watergate timeline.

QUESTION 4

Nixon's "China opening" and "détente" policies were structurally important to his 1972 re-election: (1) February 1972 China visit. Nixon was the first U.S. president to visit the People's Republic of China. He met with Chairman Mao Zedong, Premier Zhou Enlai, and other Chinese leaders. The visit ended 22 years of U.S.-China non-recognition. The Shanghai Communiqué February 27, 1972 articulated U.S. acceptance of "one China" principle while maintaining U.S. relations with Taiwan. The visit was structurally consequential: opened U.S.-China relations that have shaped Asia-Pacific politics for 50+ years; reduced Cold War tensions; created leverage against Soviet Union. (2) May 1972 Moscow Summit. Nixon visited Moscow May 22-30, 1972 and signed SALT I Treaty + ABM Treaty with Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev. First major U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement. Established "détente" framework: managed competition with the Soviet Union rather than rollback or all-out Cold War. (3) "Triangular diplomacy" - by opening China and improving Soviet relations, Nixon could play China and Soviet Union against each other. (4) Political-electoral effect: voters perceived Nixon as a foreign-policy genius who had transformed the Cold War. The China opening + détente together provided structural credibility for Nixon's 1972 re-election. McGovern's anti-war progressive positions appeared redundant - Nixon was already withdrawing from Vietnam and managing the Cold War.

AP students should be able to articulate the foreign-policy significance.