# 1972

## *Richard Nixon vs George McGovern*

A 50-minute lesson on the 1972 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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| ERA<br>Cold War Realignment | ELECTORAL VOTES<br>538 total |
| WINNER<br>Richard Nixon (Republican) · 520 EV | RUNNER-UP<br>George McGovern (Democratic) · 17 EV |
| KEY ISSUE<br>Vietnam War wind-down; Watergate (emerging); détente with USSR and China | TURNOUT<br>56.2% |

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3. Background: key terms + source
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# 1972: Richard Nixon vs George McGovern

## 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

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| **5 min** | **Warm-up** | List two structural conditions in 1969-72 America that would produce a Nixon re-election landslide. For each identify the specific 1969-72 development most responsible. |
| **15 min** | **Reading + vocab** | 1972 election was 47th U.S. presidential election. Nixon 520 EV / McGovern 17 EV. One of biggest electoral landslides in U.S. history. Nixon 60.7% popular vote second-highest since 1820 (after LBJ 1964 61.1%).<br><br>Nixon 1969-72 achievements: (1) October 1969 Vietnam troop withdrawal began. U.S. troops 543,000 (April 1969) ' ~25,000 (November 1972). (2) July 20, 1969 Apollo 11 Moon landing. (3) December 2, 1970 EPA founding. (4) January 1, 1970 NEPA signed. (5) February 1972 Nixon China visit - first U.S. president. Met Chairman Mao + Premier Zhou Enlai. Shanghai Communiqué. (6) May 26, 1972 SALT I Treaty + ABM Treaty signed Moscow with Brezhnev. (7) August 15, 1971 wage/price controls + closed gold window. (8) Détente framework with Soviet Union + China.<br><br>Economic prosperity continuing (GDP growth ~5%/year; employment 5%; consumer confidence high). Inflation rising (5%/year) - foreshadowing 1970s stagflation.<br><br>Republican Convention Miami August 21-23, 1972 renominated Nixon-Agnew by acclamation. Slogan: "Now more than ever" + "Four more years."<br><br>Democratic Party transformed by 1968 Chicago Convention chaos + McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms (1969-71). Reforms required state delegations to reflect demographic composition; replaced party-boss-controlled selection with primary elections + open caucuses; reduced superdelegates role. Structurally transformed Democratic Party from machine-controlled to grassroots-driven.<br><br>Democratic Convention Miami July 10-13, 1972 nominated McGovern on first ballot. Sen Thomas Eagleton of Missouri (42, Catholic, moderate) selected VP after McGovern considered ~9 alternatives. Convention's acceptance speeches did not begin until 2:48 AM Eastern Time July 14.<br><br>Eagleton affair July-August 1972. July 25 press revealed Eagleton hospitalized 3 |

times in 1960s for depression; received electroshock therapy. McGovern: "I am 1000 percent for Tom Eagleton." July 31 McGovern announced Eagleton withdrawal. Sargent Shriver (JFK's brother-in-law; Peace Corps founder 1961; OEO director 1964-68; Ambassador to France 1968-70) replaced August 8, 1972.

McGovern 50, Air Force WWII bomber pilot (35 missions; Distinguished Flying Cross), History PhD Northwestern 1953, SD senator since 1963, leading anti-war voice. Proposed: amnesty for Vietnam draft resisters; immediate Vietnam withdrawal; defense spending cuts; abolition of grand juries; "demogrant" $1,000 minimum annual income for every American (politically devastating; eventually withdrew).

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

June 17, 1972 (5 months before Election Day) 5 burglars caught at DNC headquarters at Watergate complex DC. James W. McCord Jr. (former CIA + FBI agent, CREEP security director); Bernard Barker; Virgilio Gonzalez; Eugenio Martinez; Frank Sturgis. Police found bugging equipment, cameras, lock-picking tools. Press initially treated as bizarre incident. Washington Post's Bob Woodward + Carl Bernstein began investigating with anonymous "Deep Throat" source (later revealed as FBI Associate Director Mark Felt). Full scope not clear before November 1972 election.

Nixon won 520 EV; McGovern 17. Nixon 49 states; McGovern 1 (Massachusetts) + DC. Popular vote: Nixon 47,168,710 (60.7%); McGovern 29,173,222 (37.5%); minor ~1.4M. Margin 17,995,488.

Geographic pattern structurally extreme. Nixon swept every region. Carried all 11 former Confederate states - first Republican carrying of entire South since 1872 (completing Goldwater 1964 Southern realignment). McGovern's Massachusetts: anti-war youth + Catholic immigrants + intellectual academic culture. "Don't Blame Me, I'm From Massachusetts" bumper sticker popular in 1973-74 as Watergate unfolded.

Watergate unfolded 1973-74:
- Senate Watergate Committee hearings May-August 1973 (Chairman Sen Sam Ervin NC)
- July 13, 1973 Alexander Butterfield revealed White House taping system
- October 20, 1973 Saturday Night Massacre - Nixon fired special prosecutor Cox; AG Richardson + Deputy AG Ruckelshaus resigned
- Spiro Agnew resigned VP October 10, 1973 (Maryland kickback scandal)
- December 6, 1973 Gerald Ford confirmed VP (first under 25th Amendment)
- July 24, 1974 US v. Nixon SCOTUS 8-0 ordered tapes turned over
- August 5, 1974 "smoking gun" tape from June 23, 1972 revealed Nixon ordered FBI

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| | | halt to investigation<br>- July 27-30, 1974 House Judiciary Committee voted 3 impeachment articles<br>- August 9, 1974 Nixon resigned - only U.S. president to resign<br>- VP Ford became 38th president<br>- September 8, 1974 Ford pardoned Nixon<br><br>1972 election structural significance paradoxical. Nixon's 49-state landslide appeared to confirm his political dominance. Watergate ended his presidency within 21 months. 1974 midterm: massive Democratic gains (49 House; 4 Senate). 1976 election: Carter Democratic victory over Ford.<br><br>McGovern 1972 defeat shaped Democratic Party for 20 years. "McGovernite" label became politically toxic - associated with cultural-liberal excess. Subsequent Democratic candidates (Carter 1976, Mondale 1984, Dukakis 1988, Clinton 1992) attempted to distance through "New Democrat" centrism. Democratic Leadership Council (DLC, founded 1985) explicitly positioned against McGovernite progressivism. Bill Clinton's 1992 candidacy structurally rooted in DLC centrism.<br><br>1972 election can be analyzed retrospectively as peak moment of Republican-conservative ascendance that Watergate briefly interrupted. Reagan 1980 resumed ascendance. |
| **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

### Richard M. Nixon
37th U.S. president (1969-74). Eisenhower's VP. Won 1968 narrowly + 1972 landslide. Resigned August 9, 1974 over Watergate - only U.S. president to resign.

### George McGovern
SD Senator and 1972 Democratic presidential nominee. Anti-war progressive. Lost 520-17 EV.

### McGovern Commission reforms
McGovern-Fraser Commission (1969-71) rewrote Democratic primary rules.

### Saturday Night Massacre
October 20, 1973 Watergate crisis. Nixon ordered AG Elliot Richardson to fire Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox. Richardson resigned rather than fire Cox. Deputy AG William Ruckelshaus also resigned. Solicitor General Robert Bork fired Cox. Massive public revulsion. Politically devastating for Nixon.

### Watergate scandal
1972-74 political scandal. June 17, 1972 burglars at DNC. CREEP connection. Cover-up exposed 1973-74. Nixon resigned August 9, 1974.

### 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.

### Nixon China visit (February 1972)
February 21-28, 1972 Nixon visit to People's Republic of China - first U.S. president. Met Chairman Mao Zedong + Premier Zhou Enlai. Shanghai Communiqué February 27, 1972. Ended 22 years of U.S.-China non-recognition.

## Resignation Address to the Nation

**RICHARD M. NIXON, AUGUST 8, 1974**

*Nixon delivered this resignation address from the Oval Office on the evening of August 8, 1974 - the day before his August 9 resignation took effect at noon. The "best interests" passage articulated Nixon's stated reason for resigning: not because he had done anything impeachable but because the political situation made effective governance impossible. The "no Watergate" passage explicitly rejected any acknowledgment of wrongdoing. The speech was politically structured: Nixon refused to admit guilt while acknowledging the political impossibility of remaining in office. The structural lesson: even forced presidential resignations can be politically choreographed to preserve maximum face-saving for the resigning president.*

> *"I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body. But as President, I must put the interests of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress, particularly at this time with problems we face at home and abroad. To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home. Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow. Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour in this office."*

**Nixon, "Resignation Address to the Nation" (Washington, DC, August 8, 1974). Public domain.**

# The 1972 Election

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

**QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How many states did Nixon win in 1972?

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

**QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

On what date did Nixon resign the presidency?

( ) A. July 27, 1974
( ) B. August 9, 1974
( ) C. September 8, 1974
( ) D. October 20, 1974

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

What was the Watergate scandal?

**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Nixon says in his resignation address "I have never been a quitter... To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress." What is the political function of this framing?

**QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER**

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

**QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ**

On the 1972 election map, identify Nixon's 49 states and McGovern's 1 state (Massachusetts) + DC. What does the geographic pattern reveal about U.S. politics in 1972?

# Answer key

## QUESTION 1

49. Nixon won 49 of 50 states. McGovern carried only Massachusetts.

AP students should know the 49-state Nixon landslide.

## QUESTION 2

August 9, 1974. Nixon's resignation took effect at noon August 9, 1974. He had delivered the resignation address from the Oval Office the evening of August 8. Gerald Ford was sworn in as 38th president that hour. Nixon remains the only U.S. president to resign.

AP students should know the August 9, 1974 date.

## QUESTION 3

Watergate was the 1972-74 political scandal that led to Nixon's August 9, 1974 resignation. Timeline: (1) June 17, 1972 burglars at DNC. (2) CREEP connection. (3) Woodward + Bernstein Washington Post investigation. "Deep Throat" = Mark Felt (FBI). (4) Senate Watergate Committee hearings May-August 1973 (Chairman Sen Sam Ervin NC). (5) July 13, 1973 Butterfield revealed White House taping. (6) October 20, 1973 Saturday Night Massacre. (7) October 10, 1973 Agnew resigned over Maryland kickback. (8) December 6, 1973 Ford confirmed VP (first under 25th Amendment). (9) July 24, 1974 US v. Nixon SCOTUS 8-0 ordered tapes. (10) August 5, 1974 "smoking gun" tape revealed Nixon ordered FBI halt. (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 resignation framing uses four rhetorical strategies: (1) "Never been a quitter" defensiveness - frames the resignation as forced rather than voluntary, preserving Nixon's self-image as fighter. (2) Public-interest justification - "the President and the Congress... should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home." Frames resignation as patriotic sacrifice rather than acknowledgment of wrongdoing. (3) "Personal vindication" implicit guilt-denial - by framing the resignation as ending the personal-vindication fight, Nixon implicitly maintains he could have won that fight on the merits. (4) Continuity reassurance - "Vice President Ford will be sworn in as President at that hour" - frames the resignation as orderly constitutional transition rather than political collapse. The political function: maximum face-saving while accepting the political impossibility of remaining in office. The structural lesson: forced presidential resignations can be politically choreographed even when the underlying facts are damning. Subsequent presidents facing political crisis (Clinton 1998 impeachment, Trump 2019/2020 impeachments) would not follow Nixon's resignation precedent.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

## QUESTION 5

Nixon's "China opening" and "détente" policies were structurally important to his 1972 re-election: (1) February 1972 China visit. First U.S. president to visit People's Republic of China. Met Chairman Mao + Premier Zhou Enlai. Shanghai Communiqué February 27, 1972 articulated U.S. acceptance of "one China" while maintaining Taiwan relations. Ended 22 years of U.S.-China non-recognition. (2) May 1972 Moscow Summit. SALT I Treaty + ABM Treaty signed with Brezhnev. First major U.S.-Soviet arms control agreement. Established détente framework. (3) "Triangular diplomacy" - playing China and Soviet Union against each other. (4) Political-electoral effect: voters perceived Nixon as foreign-policy genius. McGovern's anti-war progressive positions appeared redundant - Nixon was already withdrawing from Vietnam and managing Cold War.

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

## QUESTION 6

Nixon states (49): everything except Massachusetts. Including all of Northeast (except MA), all Mid-Atlantic, all Midwest, all Mountain West, all West Coast, all 11 former Confederate states (first Republican carrying of entire South since 1872 - completing Goldwater 1964 Southern realignment). McGovern states (1): Massachusetts (14 EV) + DC (3 EV) = 17 EV total. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Nixon's coalition geographically comprehensive. (2) Massachusetts was structural anti-war youth + Catholic immigrants + intellectual academic culture. (3) The Southern realignment Goldwater 1964 had inaugurated was completed by Nixon 1972. From 1972 onward, the Solid South would become structural Republican in presidential elections. (4) The 1972 map would not be matched until Reagan 1984 (49 states; the same 49 states - McGovern in MA again as Mondale's home state was MN). (5) The "Don't Blame Me, I'm From Massachusetts" bumper sticker became popular in 1973-74 as Watergate unfolded - structural recognition that Massachusetts had voted against Nixon when most of the country had voted for him.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural pattern.