1972

Richard Nixon vs George McGovern

A 75-minute lesson on the 1972 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) · 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 + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1972: Richard Nixon vs George McGovern

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 1972 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1972 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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 1969-72 achievements: Vietnam troop withdrawal began October 1969; July 1969 Apollo 11 Moon landing; December 1970 EPA; February 1972 China visit (first U.S. president); May 1972 SALT I Treaty + ABM Treaty with Soviet Union; August 1971 wage/price controls + gold window closure; détente framework. Economic prosperity continuing. Inflation rising (5%/year) - foreshadowing 1970s stagflation. Republican Convention Miami August 21-23, 1972 renominated Nixon-Agnew. Slogan "Now more than ever" + "Four more years." Democratic Party transformed by McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms (1969-71). Required state delegations to reflect demographic composition; replaced party-boss selection with primaries + open caucuses. Structurally transformed Democratic Party from machine-controlled to grassroots-driven. Democratic Convention Miami July 10-13, 1972 nominated McGovern on first ballot. Sen Thomas Eagleton (MO) VP. Convention's acceptance speeches did not begin until 2:48 AM Eastern Time. 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 Eagleton withdrew. Sargent Shriver replaced

August 8.

McGovern 50, Air Force WWII bomber pilot, History PhD, SD senator since 1963. Proposed amnesty for draft resisters, immediate Vietnam withdrawal, defense cuts, "demogrant" $1,000 minimum annual income (politically devastating; withdrew).

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

June 17, 1972 5 burglars caught at DNC headquarters at Watergate complex DC. Burglars connected to CREEP. Woodward + Bernstein Washington Post investigation began with anonymous "Deep Throat" source (Mark Felt). Full scope not clear before November 1972.

Nixon 520 EV / McGovern 17. Nixon 49 states; McGovern Massachusetts + DC. Popular vote: Nixon 60.7% / McGovern 37.5%. Margin 17,995,488.

Geographic pattern: Nixon swept every region including all 11 former Confederate states - completed Goldwater 1964 Southern realignment.

Watergate unfolded 1973-74: Senate Watergate Committee May-August 1973; July 1973 Butterfield revealed taping; October 20, 1973 Saturday Night Massacre; October 10, 1973 Agnew resigned; December 1973 Ford confirmed VP (first under 25th Amendment); July 24, 1974 US v. Nixon 8-0 ordered tapes; August 5, 1974 "smoking gun" tape; July 27-30, 1974 impeachment articles; August 9, 1974 Nixon resigned - only U.S. president to resign; September 8, 1974 Ford pardoned Nixon.

1972 election structural significance paradoxical. Nixon's 49-state landslide confirmed political dominance. Watergate ended presidency within 21 months. 1974 midterm: Democrats gained 49 House + 4 Senate seats. 1976 election: Carter defeated Ford.

McGovern 1972 defeat shaped Democratic Party 20 years. "McGovernite" label politically toxic. Subsequent Democrats (Carter 1976, Mondale 1984, Dukakis 1988, Clinton 1992) attempted distance through "New Democrat" centrism. DLC founded 1985.

1972 election can be analyzed retrospectively as peak Republican-conservative ascendance that Watergate briefly interrupted. Reagan 1980 resumed ascendance.

The 1972-1974 sequence is one of the most consequential political reversals in U.S. presidential history. Nixon's January 1973 inauguration appeared to confirm his political dominance. The Vietnam War formally ended January 27, 1973 (Paris Peace Accords). Domestic economy was strong. Détente with Soviet Union and China appeared to be transforming Cold War politics. Then 21 months of Watergate

		revelations destroyed the presidency. The structural lesson: in U.S. politics, electoral mandate provides limited protection against personal scandal or systemic institutional failure. The McGovern 1972 defeat's structural significance for the Democratic Party: (1) The 22.6-percentage-point loss margin was the worst Democratic presidential performance since 1924 (Davis 28.8%). (2) The "McGovernite" stigma made future Democratic nominees emphasize centrism rather than progressivism. (3) The McGovern coalition (anti-war youth, minorities, women, intellectuals, organized labor) reflected the new Democratic base but could not produce national majorities in the post-1968 political environment. (4) Subsequent Democratic strategists would emphasize Southern and working-class white outreach: Carter 1976 (Southern Democrat); Bill Clinton 1992 (DLC centrist Southern Democrat); Obama 2008 (post-racial coalition-building). The McGovern 1972 defeat was the structural template for what Democrats would attempt to avoid in subsequent elections. 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 1972 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

Richard M. Nixon
37th U.S. president (1969-74).

George McGovern
SD Senator and 1972 Democratic presidential nominee. 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 fired special prosecutor Cox; AG Richardson + Deputy AG Ruckelshaus resigned.

Watergate scandal
1972-74 political scandal. Nixon resigned August 9, 1974.

Eagleton affair
July-August 1972 Democratic VP crisis.

Nixon China visit (February 1972)
February 21-28, 1972 Nixon visit to People's Republic of China - first U.S. president.

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.

> *"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 (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 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's resignation address uses "I have never been a quitter" framing. What is the rhetorical strategy?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the McGovern 1972 defeat shaped Democratic Party direction for the next 20 years.

QUESTION 7 · 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?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

49. Nixon won 49 of 50 states.

AP students should know the 49-state Nixon landslide.

QUESTION 2

August 9, 1974. Resignation took effect at noon. Ford sworn in 38th president that hour.

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. June 17, 1972 burglars at DNC at Watergate complex. CREEP connection. Woodward + Bernstein investigation with "Deep Throat" source (Mark Felt). Senate Watergate Committee May-August 1973. July 1973 Butterfield revealed taping. October 20, 1973 Saturday Night Massacre. October 10, 1973 Agnew resigned. December 1973 Ford confirmed VP. July 24, 1974 US v. Nixon SCOTUS 8-0 ordered tapes. August 5, 1974 "smoking gun" tape. July 27-30, 1974 impeachment articles. August 9, 1974 Nixon resigned. September 8, 1974 Ford pardoned Nixon.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Nixon's "I have never been a quitter" rhetorical strategy: (1) Defensive framing - resignation positioned as forced rather than voluntary. (2) Public-interest justification - patriotic sacrifice rather than acknowledgment of wrongdoing. (3) Implicit guilt-denial - "personal vindication" framing implies Nixon could have won the fight on merits. (4) Continuity reassurance - orderly constitutional transition. Maximum face-saving while accepting political impossibility of remaining in office.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 5

Nixon's "China opening" and "détente" policies structurally important: (1) February 1972 China visit - first U.S. president. Shanghai Communiqué. Ended 22 years of U.S.-China non-recognition. (2) May 1972 Moscow Summit - SALT I + ABM Treaty with Brezhnev. First major U.S.-Soviet arms control. (3) "Triangular diplomacy" - playing China and Soviet Union against each other. (4) Political-electoral effect: voters perceived Nixon as foreign-policy genius. McGovern anti-war positions appeared redundant.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

The McGovern 1972 defeat shaped Democratic Party direction for the next 20 years in five structural ways: (1) "McGovernite" label became politically toxic. Associated with cultural-liberal excess, anti-war progressivism, "acid, amnesty, and abortion." Subsequent Democratic candidates would attempt to distance themselves from McGovernite associations. (2) "New Democrat" centrism emerged. Jimmy Carter 1976 (Southern Democrat, evangelical Christian, moderate). Walter Mondale 1984 (Minnesota Democrat, more centrist than McGovern but lost to Reagan 49-1 states). Michael Dukakis 1988 (Massachusetts Democrat, centrist on economic issues but lost over Willie Horton + tank photo + "card-carrying member of the ACLU"). Bill Clinton 1992 (DLC chairman 1990-91, structurally rooted in DLC centrism). (3) Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) founded 1985 by Al From + Bruce Babbitt + others - explicitly positioned against McGovernite progressivism. The DLC produced the "Third Way" framework: fiscal responsibility + welfare reform + free trade + cultural moderation. Clinton 1992 + Obama 2008 followed DLC framework. (4) Southern strategy for Democrats. Recognition that Democrats needed to compete in Southern states required Southern Democratic candidates (Carter 1976/80; Clinton 1992/96) or Southern-friendly campaign positions. (5) Working-class white outreach. McGovern's loss of working-class whites to Nixon required Democratic strategists to recover this constituency. The framework would be applied 1976, 1980 (failed), 1992, 1996, 2000 (failed), 2008, 2012, 2016 (failed), 2020 (succeeded), 2024 (failed). The cumulative effect: the McGovern 1972 defeat was the structural template for what Democrats would attempt to avoid in subsequent presidential elections.

AP students should be able to articulate the transformation.

QUESTION 7

Nixon states (49): everything except Massachusetts. McGovern states (1): Massachusetts + DC. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Nixon's coalition geographically comprehensive. (2) Massachusetts was anti-war youth + Catholic immigrants + intellectual academic culture. (3) Southern realignment Goldwater 1964 inaugurated completed by Nixon 1972 - first Republican carrying of entire South since 1872. (4) 1972 map matched by Reagan 1984 (49 states; same Massachusetts pattern as Mondale's home state MN was the second state). (5) "Don't Blame Me, I'm From Massachusetts" bumper sticker popular in 1973-74.

AP students should be able to articulate.

Discussion prompts

1. Nixon won 49 states in 1972 but resigned in disgrace 1974. Identify three structural reasons electoral landslides do not necessarily guarantee political survival.

2. McGovern Commission reforms (1969-71) transformed Democratic primary system. Identify three structural consequences of the reforms for subsequent Democratic Party direction.