AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

# 1972

## *Richard Nixon vs George McGovern*

A 105-minute lesson on the 1972 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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% |

CONTENTS


1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
4. Primary source B (DBQ pair)
5. Worksheet (8 questions)
6. Long-essay-question + rubric
7. Answer key + discussion

# 1972: Richard Nixon vs George McGovern

## 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

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| **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. Biggest electoral landslide in U.S. history (tied with Reagan 1984).<br><br>Nixon 1969-72: Vietnam troop withdrawal began October 1969; Apollo 11 July 1969; EPA December 1970; China visit February 1972; SALT I + ABM Treaty May 1972; wage/price controls August 1971; détente.<br><br>Republican Convention Miami August 21-23, 1972 renominated Nixon-Agnew. Slogan "Four more years."<br><br>Democratic Party transformed by McGovern-Fraser Commission (1969-71). Democratic Convention Miami July 10-13, 1972 nominated McGovern on first ballot. Eagleton VP, replaced by Shriver August 8, 1972 after electroshock-therapy revelations.<br><br>Nixon framed McGovern as "acid, amnesty, and abortion."<br><br>June 17, 1972 5 burglars at DNC at Watergate complex. CREEP connection. Press initially treated as bizarre incident.<br><br>Nixon 520 EV / McGovern 17. Nixon 49 states; McGovern Massachusetts + DC. Popular vote: Nixon 60.7%; McGovern 37.5%. Margin 17,995,488. Nixon carried all 11 former Confederate states - completing Goldwater 1964 Southern realignment.<br><br>Watergate unfolded 1973-74. Senate Watergate Committee May-August 1973. Saturday Night Massacre October 20, 1973. Agnew resigned October 10, 1973. Ford confirmed VP December 1973 (first under 25th Amendment). July 24, 1974 US v. Nixon SCOTUS 8-0. "Smoking gun" tape August 5, 1974. Impeachment articles July 27-30, 1974. Nixon resigned August 9, 1974. Ford pardoned Nixon September 8, 1974. |

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

McGovern 1972 defeat shaped Democratic Party 20 years. "McGovernite" toxic. Subsequent Democrats (Carter, Mondale, Dukakis, Clinton) attempted "New Democrat" centrism. DLC founded 1985. Bill Clinton 1992 candidacy structurally rooted in DLC centrism.

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. Vietnam War formally ended January 27, 1973 (Paris Peace Accords). Domestic economy strong. Détente transforming Cold War. Then 21 months of Watergate revelations destroyed the presidency.

The 1972 election's long-term structural significance: (1) Completed Goldwater 1964 Southern realignment. (2) Inaugurated 1968-1992 Republican presidential dominance (Republicans won 5 of 6 elections 1968-88; only Carter 1976 was Democratic exception). (3) Established the structural electoral template for Republican landslides: South + Midwest + West Coast + working-class whites. Reagan 1980 + 1984 + Bush 1988 followed the template. (4) Created the McGovernite-progressive vs DLC-centrist split that would dominate Democratic Party debate through 2008. (5) Watergate produced post-1974 reforms: Federal Election Campaign Act 1974 + Privacy Act 1974 + War Powers Resolution 1973 (over Nixon's veto) + Independent Counsel statute 1978.

The Watergate scandal's long-term structural significance: (1) Established modern investigative journalism. Woodward + Bernstein's "All the President's Men" (1974 book + 1976 film) became the template for political investigative reporting. (2) Established post-Watergate distrust of government. Public confidence in federal institutions declined from ~76% (1964) to ~25% (1980s); has not recovered. (3) Established Special Prosecutor / Independent Counsel framework. Operationalized through Whitewater (Clinton 1994-98), Plame affair (Bush 2003-05), Russia investigation (Trump 2017-19). (4) Established 25th Amendment Section 2 (VP vacancy) operationalization. Used 1973 Ford; 1974 Rockefeller; potentially Cheney 2001-09 if Bush incapacitated. (5) Established the constitutional principle that even popular presidents are subject to impeachment for criminal misconduct. Clinton 1998-99 + Trump 2019-20 + Trump 2021 followed the precedent.

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| **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** | |

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| | | 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

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

**George McGovern**
SD Senator and 1972 Democratic nominee.

**McGovern Commission reforms**
McGovern-Fraser Commission (1969-71).

**Saturday Night Massacre**
October 20, 1973 Watergate crisis.

**Democratic Leadership Council (DLC)**
Founded 1985 by Al From + Bruce Babbitt. Explicitly positioned against McGovernite progressivism. "Third Way" framework: fiscal responsibility + welfare reform + free trade + cultural moderation. Bill Clinton chair 1990-91. Clinton 1992 + Obama 2008 followed framework.

**Watergate scandal**
1972-74 political scandal.

**Eagleton affair**
July-August 1972 Democratic VP crisis.

**Nixon China visit (February 1972)**
First U.S. president visit to PRC.

**25th Amendment**
Ratified February 23, 1967. VP succession + presidential disability procedures.

## 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.**

# 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

## Resignation Address to the Nation

RICHARD M. NIXON, 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.

SOURCE B

## Address to the Nation upon Pardoning Richard Nixon

GERALD R. FORD, SEPTEMBER 8, 1974

*“My fellow Americans, I have come to a decision which I felt I should tell you. I have searched my conscience and I know it is the right thing to do. The Constitution is the supreme law of our land and it governs our actions as citizens. Only the laws of God, which govern our consciences, are superior to it. As we are a nation under God, so I am sworn to uphold our laws with the help of God. Now, therefore, I, Gerald R. Ford, President of the United States, pursuant to the pardon power conferred upon me by Article II, Section 2, of the Constitution, have granted and by these presents do grant a full, free, and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon for all offenses against the United States which he, Richard Nixon, has committed or may have committed or taken part in during the period from January 20, 1969 through August 9, 1974.”*

Ford, "Address to the Nation upon Pardoning Richard Nixon" (Washington, DC, September 8, 1974). Public domain.

# The 1972 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 August 1974 resignation) articulating defensive resignation framing. Quote it verbatim.

**QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Ford September 1974 pardon) articulating the constitutional basis for the pardon. Quote it verbatim.

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Both sources involve the Nixon-Ford 1974 transition but address different structural challenges. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Ford's September 1974 pardon was widely criticized as a "deal" for Nixon's August resignation. What was the political cost to Ford?

**QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER**
Identify three specific post-Watergate constitutional or statutory reforms operationalized 1973-78.

**QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**
How many days passed between Nixon's August 9, 1974 resignation and Ford's September 8, 1974 pardon?

( ) A. 15
( ) B. 30
( ) C. 45
( ) D. 60

**QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**
What was Ford's approval rating immediately after taking office?

( ) A. 52%
( ) B. 63%
( ) C. 71%
( ) D. 84%

**QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER**
Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1972 election about Nixon-landslide, McGovern-defeat, or Watergate-scandal? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

# Long-essay-question

**LEQ PROMPT**

Nixon's August 1974 resignation address (Source A) articulated the rhetorical framework for presidential resignation - "I have never been a quitter" but "I must put the interests of America first." Ford's September 1974 pardon (Source B) ended Watergate prosecutions against Nixon at substantial political cost to Ford's own 1976 prospects. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1969-1992 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1972 election's structural significance was (a) Nixon's 49-state landslide completing the Goldwater 1964 Southern realignment, (b) the McGovern 1972 defeat structurally shaping Democratic Party direction for 20 years, or (c) the Watergate scandal that would destroy Nixon's presidency and reshape U.S. constitutional politics. Defend a clear thesis.

**GRADING RUBRIC**

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the Nixon-landslide-vs-McGovern-defeat-vs-Watergate-scandal axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the China visit, SALT I, the Vietnam withdrawal, the McGovern Commission reforms, the Saturday Night Massacre, Agnew resignation, the 25th Amendment, the 1976 Carter election, the Reagan 1980 election. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

# Answer key

**QUESTION 1**

Accept any of: "I have never been a quitter. To leave office before my term is completed is abhorrent to every instinct in my body", "as President, I must put the interests of America first", "America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress", "To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention". The "I have never been a quitter" phrase is the most distinctive defensive framing.

Nixon's framing established the defensive resignation narrative.

**QUESTION 2**

Accept any of: "pursuant to the pardon power conferred upon me by Article II, Section 2, of the Constitution", "a full, free, and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon for all offenses against the United States", "The Constitution is the supreme law of our land and it governs our actions as citizens". The "Article II, Section 2" phrase is the most distinctive constitutional citation.

Ford's framing established the constitutional pardon power basis.

**QUESTION 3**

Source A is Nixon's August 1974 resignation speech - articulated to maximize face-saving while accepting the political impossibility of remaining in office. The function is to frame the resignation as patriotic sacrifice rather than acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Source B is Ford's September 1974 pardon - articulated 30 days after Nixon's resignation to end Watergate prosecutions. The function is to resolve the structural constitutional crisis at substantial political cost to Ford. Together, the sources reveal the 1974 Nixon-Ford transition: Nixon's defensive resignation + Ford's constitutional pardon = the structural framework for U.S. presidential accountability post-Watergate.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural framework.

**QUESTION 4**

Ford's September 8, 1974 pardon imposed three structural political costs: (1) Approval rating decline. Ford's approval fell from 71% (immediately after taking office August 9) to 49% (after the pardon September 9). The 22-percentage-point decline was structurally consequential. (2) "Deal" allegations. Critics alleged Ford had agreed to pardon Nixon as quid-pro-quo for Nixon's August resignation. Ford insisted there had been no deal. Subsequent historical analysis (Watergate special counsel Leon Jaworski + Senate testimony + later interviews) supported Ford's denial but the perception of a deal persisted. (3) 1976 election damage. Ford lost the 1976 presidential election to Jimmy Carter by 297-240 EV with 50.1% to 48.0% popular vote. The Watergate-related distrust of Republican Party + Ford's pardon were structural factors. Without the pardon, Ford might have won re-election; with it, he was politically vulnerable. The structural lesson: presidential pardons of predecessors can resolve immediate constitutional crises but at significant political cost to the pardoning president. The 1974 Ford pardon was the structural template that subsequent presidents would consider when facing similar situations (e.g., would Pence have pardoned Trump if he had succeeded as president in 2021?).

AP students should be able to articulate the political costs.

**QUESTION 5**

Three specific post-Watergate constitutional or statutory reforms 1973-78: (1) War Powers Resolution (November 7, 1973). Passed over Nixon's veto. Required president to notify Congress within 48 hours of committing U.S. armed forces to military action. Required termination within 60 days unless Congress authorized continuation. Structural attempt to limit presidential war-making authority post-Vietnam. (2) Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974 + 1976 amendments (October 1974 + May 1976). Established contribution + spending limits; required federal-candidate disclosure; created Federal Election Commission (FEC). Buckley v. Valeo (January 1976) Supreme Court ruling that spending limits were unconstitutional but contribution limits + disclosure requirements were constitutional. (3) Privacy Act of 1974 (December 31, 1974) - federal-record-keeping reforms protecting individual privacy + restricting federal agency information collection. (4) Freedom of Information Act amendments (November 1974 - over Ford's veto). Strengthened public access to federal records. (5) Ethics in Government Act of 1978 (October 26, 1978) - financial disclosure for senior federal officials; Independent Counsel statute (lapsed 1999); restrictions on post-employment lobbying ("revolving door" restrictions); Office of Government Ethics. (6) Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972 (October 6, 1972) - though pre-Watergate, was operationalized in post-Watergate context. (7) Inspector General Act of 1978 (October 12, 1978) - established independent inspectors general within federal agencies. The cumulative effect: by 1978, U.S. federal government had been structurally reformed in response to Watergate-era abuses. Many reforms persist as structural features of U.S. federal governance.

AP students should be able to articulate multiple reforms.

**QUESTION 6**

30. Ford pardoned Nixon September 8, 1974 - exactly 30 days after Nixon's August 9, 1974 resignation. The 30-day interval was structurally important: it gave Ford time to address transition issues but was short enough that the pardon could be perceived as continuing the Watergate resolution.

AP students should know the 30-day interval.

**QUESTION 7**

71%. Ford's approval rating was 71% immediately after taking office August 9, 1974 - structurally high but quickly damaged by the September pardon. The pardon caused approval to drop to 49%. By the 1976 election, Ford's approval was approximately 45-48%.

AP students should know the 71% post-inauguration approval.

**QUESTION 8**

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the Nixon-landslide-vs-McGovern-defeat-vs-Watergate-scandal axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory.