# 1972

## *Richard Nixon vs George McGovern*

A 20-minute lesson on the 1972 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, 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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# 1972

Nixon had been president 4 years. He had won 1968 in close 301-191 race over Hubert Humphrey + George Wallace (third party 46 EV). Nixon achievements 1969-72: (1) October 1969 began Vietnam troop withdrawal. (2) July 1969 Apollo 11 Moon landing. (3) Environmental Protection Agency December 1970. (4) Diplomatic opening to China February 1972 (Nixon visit). (5) Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT I) May 1972 with Soviet Union. (6) Détente with Soviet Union and China. (7) Wage and price controls August 1971. (8) Vietnam War winding down (~25,000 troops by November 1972 from 543,000 peak 1969).

Things looked great for Nixon. But June 17, 1972 5 burglars caught at Democratic National Committee headquarters at Watergate complex in Washington DC. Burglars connected to Nixon's Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP). Press initially treated as bizarre incident. Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein began investigating. Nixon White House began cover-up.

Democrats nominated Sen George McGovern of South Dakota. McGovern was 50, Air Force WWII bomber pilot, history professor, senator since 1963, anti-war progressive. Won nomination after

structural McGovern Commission reforms transformed Democratic primary system. Sen Thomas Eagleton of Missouri picked as VP at July 12, 1972 Miami convention. Eagleton withdrew July 31, 1972 after press revealed he had received electroshock therapy for depression. Sargent Shriver (JFK's brother-in-law, founder of Peace Corps) replaced Eagleton.

Look at picture. That Richard Nixon - won 1972 landslide but resigned 1974 over Watergate.

McGovern was structurally too liberal for 1972 voters. He proposed: amnesty for Vietnam draft resisters; immediate Vietnam withdrawal; cuts to defense spending; abolition of grand juries; minimum income for the poor. Nixon framed McGovern as "acid, amnesty, and abortion" - representing 1960s counterculture excess.

Election Day November 7, 1972: Nixon 520 EV vs McGovern 17. Popular vote: Nixon 60.7% vs McGovern 37.5%. Nixon carried 49 states. McGovern carried only Massachusetts (14 EV) + DC (3 EV). One of biggest landslides in U.S. history.

Then Watergate scandal unfolded 1973-74. Senate Watergate Committee hearings May 1973. White House tapes revealed June 1973. Saturday Night Massacre October 20, 1973. Tapes turned



*Richard M. Nixon, the 37th U.S. president. He won the 1972 election by a 49-state landslide but resigned in disgrace in 1974 over Watergate.*

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# Let's talk about the story

**1.**

How many states did Richard Nixon win in 1972?

**2.**

What was the Watergate scandal?

**3.**

What was the Eagleton affair?

## Warm-up (5 min)

In 1972 Nixon won re-election by HUGE landslide. 49 states out of 50. Only Massachusetts + DC voted for Democrat George McGovern. Eight months earlier the Watergate burglary had happened. Nixon would resign August 9, 1974 over it.

## Answer key

**1.**

49 states. Nixon won 49 of 50 states in 1972. McGovern carried only Massachusetts (14 EV) + DC (3 EV) = 17 EV total. Nixon 520 EV; McGovern 17. One of biggest electoral landslides in U.S. history. Popular vote: Nixon 60.7% vs McGovern 37.5%. Nixon won every state except Massachusetts.

AP students should know the 49-state Nixon landslide.

**2.**

Watergate was the 1972-74 political scandal that led to Nixon's August 9, 1974 resignation - the only U.S. president to resign. June 17, 1972: 5 burglars caught at Democratic National Committee headquarters at Watergate complex in Washington DC. Burglars connected to Nixon's Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP). Nixon White House began cover-up. Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein investigated through 1972-74. Sources included anonymous "Deep Throat" (later revealed as FBI Associate Director Mark Felt). Senate Watergate Committee hearings May-August 1973. June 1973 White House tapes revealed. October 20, 1973 Saturday Night Massacre - Nixon fired Watergate special prosecutor Archibald Cox; AG Elliot Richardson and Deputy AG William Ruckelshaus resigned rather than fire Cox. July 24, 1974 Supreme Court ordered tapes turned over (US v. Nixon, 8-0 vote). "Smoking gun" tape from June 23, 1972 revealed Nixon had ordered FBI to halt Watergate investigation. July 27-30, 1974 House Judiciary Committee voted three impeachment articles. August 9, 1974 Nixon resigned. VP Gerald Ford became 38th president. Ford pardoned Nixon September 8, 1974.

AP students should know Watergate.

**3.**

The Eagleton affair was the July-August 1972 Democratic VP crisis. Sen Thomas Eagleton of Missouri (42 years old) was selected as McGovern's VP nominee at the July 12, 1972 Miami Democratic Convention. The selection process had been chaotic - McGovern had considered approximately 9 alternatives and made the choice in haste. On July 25, 1972 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." But over the next week, political pressure grew. July 31, 1972 McGovern announced Eagleton was withdrawing. Sargent Shriver (JFK's brother-in-law, founder of Peace Corps 1961, McGovern's ambassador to France 1968-70) replaced Eagleton on August 8, 1972. The Eagleton affair damaged McGovern's political credibility in three ways: (1) Demonstrated poor judgment in the original Eagleton selection. (2) "1000 percent" defense followed by withdrawal made McGovern appear weak and indecisive. (3) The mental-health stigma of the 1970s was structurally damaging - voters questioned both Eagleton's fitness and McGovern's judgment for selecting him. The affair contributed to McGovern's 520-17 EV landslide loss.

AP students should know the Eagleton affair.