

## Theme 5: Nixon

### Key Question 1: Why did Nixon win the 1968 election?

#### Conclusion:

President Nixon, widely labelled a 'liberal' (Tom Wicker) yet 'calculating' (Stanley Kutler) politician won the 1968 election due to multiple factors independent to his own campaigning. A significant reason was the weakness and division surrounding the Democrat candidature, however his path to the presidency was most significantly influenced by the legacy and instability created by Johnson, a Democrat president who had become increasingly unpopular by continuing the war in Vietnam. The media rhetoric of Democratic distrust, and contextual volatility that surrounded it, created a power vacuum Nixon was able to fill through his somewhat successful campaign strategy.

#### Points:

#### **Nixon's strategic campaigning and strengths won him the election**

- Nixon sought to appeal to the 'silent majority' who felt resentful and wanted someone to defend America's status quo against radical change
  - Made up 55% of the population so it was a strategic audience
  - Described by TIME magazine as 'the embodiment of Middle America'
  - 1984 interview: 'my source of strength was more Main Street than Wall Street'
  - Appealed to hopes that he would dismantle the Democrat welfare state – middle America had seen a decrease in their standard of living as income had increased by 86%, but the rate of borrowing due to inflation (4.7%) had increased to 113%
    - This led to resentment of a welfare system they deemed an unfair burden
    - New Federalism – recalibration of balance of power between states and federal government
  - Choose a running mate 1968 Maryland Governor, Spiro Agnew – impressed Middle America
    - Known for hard hitting attacks on rioters, radicals and East Coast liberals
- Promised to be the 'law and order' candidate
  - Cited statistics 'in the last 45 minutes this is what has happened...one murder, two rapes, 45 major crimes of violence'
  - Less and cheaper government – attacked bureaucracy that implemented welfare and poverty programmes
  - Used the Kerner Commission to his advantage
- Successfully employed 'southern strategy'
  - Many had felt alienated by Johnson's policy of cutting off federal funds to school districts – a policy Nixon rejected
  - Represented a candidate who seemed unwilling to push integration
  - Shared conservatism and dislike of liberal intellectuals – he was from California himself
- Improved campaigning
  - Appeared statesmanlike, dignified and experienced
  - Avoided hostile journalists
  - Refused to debate with his opponent – instead used produced, edited TV footage of question sessions with ordinary voters
    - Link to his previous TV debate with Kennedy that had negatively impacted his public image in the 1960 election

#### **However, despite his clearly strategic campaign management, he was clearly an unpopular candidate**

- Nixon had the lowest winning margin in the popular vote since 1912
  - He won 43.4% to Humphrey's 42.7% - George Wallace, who campaigned on similar grounds and ran as an independent (which significantly reduced his chances) had won 13.5%
    - This shows many supported Wallace over the official Republican candidate, indicative of the fact he did not impress Americans
  - Turnout was 60% which means Nixon won the vote of less than 27% of Americans
- This would suggest that rather than the election being based on Nixon's success, he was the fortunate, and only viable, recipient to benefit from the Democrat's failures.

### The Democrats lost the election

- Divisions in the Democrat Party weakened their reputation
  - Anti-war Democrats resented the way their anti war candidates had been treated and rejected – manipulation of candidacy election by Johnson
    - This shows the link to Johnson's character as an individual and the way this impacted the reputation of the Democrat party
  - Many thought Humphrey would continue Johnson's policies and the war in Vietnam
  - Divisions between McCarthy and Humphrey – McCarthy challenged Humphrey to a series of debates on Vietnam
    - Humphrey later criticises McCarthy's late declaration of support (only a few days before the election) as a reason he lost
- Loss of George Wallace, who ran as an independent candidate – pledged an immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam
  - Won 20% approval rating and 13.5% of the vote – this shows how the Democrats divided their support base
- As soon as Humphrey switched his narrative on Vietnam, the Democrat votes rose significantly in the later stages of the election
  - Able to dominate in the Northwest
  - Won 95% of the African American vote – shows the divisions that plagued society at the time

**Society, and therefore in microcosm the Democrat Party was clearly plagued by divisions by the end of Johnson's term, most notably on civil rights and the war in Vietnam. Thus, while party divisions can be blamed as a significant contributor, more significant is the role of Johnson himself in perpetuating a failed Democrat image tied to the controversies of Vietnam and instability.**

### Therefore, Johnson's presidential legacy created a void for Nixon to fill

- Johnson was a Democrat who had grown increasingly unpopular by the end of his term
  - Won by a narrow margin in the Democrat nominations for candidature against Eugene McCarthy – 42% vs 49%
- There was a growing contextual need for stability
  - Assassination of Martin Luther King April, assassination of Robert Kennedy in June
- Popular discontent with Johnson and his policies discredited the Democrats
  - August 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago – attended by 10,000 Yippies and anti-war protestors – the aim to show contempt for the American political process.
  - Johnson was seen to have manipulated the vote in order to result in Humphrey's successful nomination
  - Humphrey stated after the election that he 'did not realise how deep the anger and hatred of the young had become' and that he could not win over the young, anti-war voters