

PLAYING POLITICS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN BOARD GAMES

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Board Games as a Reflection of Popular Views

Board games are a prolific expression of public sentiment which is constructed around the dominant capitalist ideology. By examining how board games represent the presidential election process that were released in the latter half of the 20th century, two main ideas will be explored. First, the changing public opinion of presidential politics, marked by rising cynicism and a distrust for government and politicians, are reflected in the games themselves and are indicative of larger trends. Second, these games reveal the underlying capitalist ideology and how it is intertwined with the democratic process in ways that are both masked and justified by the games.



Various Presidential-election themed board games.
Images from www.boardgamegeek.com

My discussion will focus on two games released in the late 1960s and early 1970s. *Mr. President* was released in 1967 in a series of games based around pedagogical play that utilizes a mechanic of card management to simulate campaigning for a presidential election. *Lie, Cheat, and Steal* was released in 1971 as part of a series of adult-oriented games aimed at social issues and satire. On one level, these games reflect societal trends of rising cynicism and distrust for government. But beyond these trends, board games represent constructed microcosms of the “real world” as framed by the dominant ideology. My exploration into these games will focus on several key patterns that highlight how these games reinforce the dominant capitalist ideology and naturalize its marriage to democratic government. I argue that while *Mr. President* masked the reality of politics behind an idealized vision, *Lie, Cheat, and Steal*, through its satirical tone and hidden mechanics, legitimized this cynical view as the only possible reality.

Campaigning: Issues vs. Mudslinging



In *Mr. President*, the gameplay is oriented around an idealized vision of a campaign. The cards which affect the game are focused almost entirely on issues. This issue-centric campaigning emphasizes the importance of ideas, rather than personality, in the actual democratic process.

Candidates are compared based on issues and their relationship to the campaign process. *Mr. President* makes no reference to specific concerns of the day. Instead, issues of race and inequality, feminism, and war are masked behind phrases like “urban renewal” and “foreign policy.” Popular support is not reflected on these cards, instead it is ideally what is measured by the election, with the electoral vote reflecting the popular desire.



In contrast, the playable cards in *Lie, Cheat, and Steal* are focused solely on character assassination. Even funds are distributed not as a campaign fund but as salaries, investments, and robberies.

 GENERAL ROBERT L. ANDERSON National Security Team NEW JERSEY (17) State Troops (1000)	CAMPAIGN ABILITY	10
	FINANCIAL SUPPORT	10
	PRESS SUPPORT	7
	FUND RAISING	1
	ADVERTISING	5
	EFFECTIVE TOTAL	29
 WESLEY VAN ALLEN Governor of INDIANA (13) State Troops (1000)	CAMPAIGN ABILITY	8
	FINANCIAL SUPPORT	6
	PRESS SUPPORT	6
	FUND RAISING	2
	ADVERTISING	4
	EFFECTIVE TOTAL	26

Unpacking the Game: Exploring Cover Design

The design and construction of the game box acts as the entrance to the game, and thus is a meaningful point of entrance for an analysis of these games. While generally divorced from gameplay, these covers do frame the game, both literally and metaphorically, and thus help to construct the game’s narrative while simultaneously sending clear ideological messages about the games and their place in society.

Emphasis on electoral process: In contrast to the “Game of Political Power”, *Mr. President* focuses not on the result so much as the process. This is reflected in the subtitle as well as the general aesthetic of the cover.

Presidential figure: This figure is separated from the general population in several ways. The blue suit marks him, as does his elevated position and larger size.

Population and President: While separated from the general population, the President figure is also based on their support. This is revealed by the positioning of the President on a foundation of the general populous.

Populous Demography: Everyone allowed to participate in politics is wealthy and white, and even predominantly male.

Overlook of the capital contextualizes the game as a practical lesson in actual politics.

The description of the game emphasizes its connections with the real world, emphasizing actual voting statistics and decisions that confront actual political candidates.”

The emphasis has shifted from the relationship between the candidate and populous to how the politician oversees and controls the world.

Seriously. Look at this guy. He has “corrupt politician” written all over him.

Screw and screwdriver suggest politicians are tampering with the political machinery.



Some games used caricatures of the Parties to deemphasize the relevance of the candidates. Image from www.boardgamegeek.com

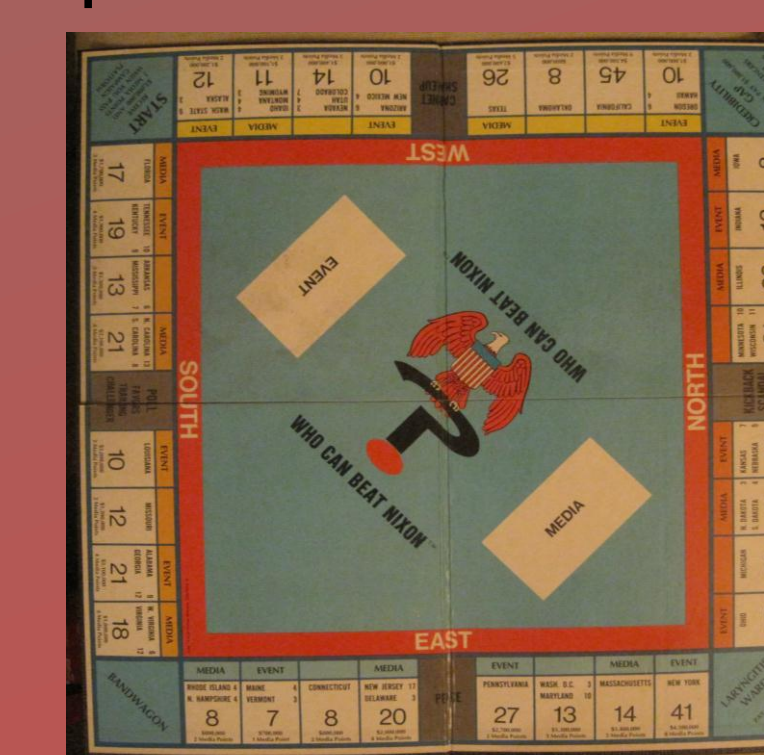
On Board: Capitalism as *Monopoly* as Democracy

Lie Cheat & Steal utilizes a *Monopoly*-style board, with the addition of alternative paths around corners, The literal option to “cut corners” in movement reflects the ability of politicians to metaphorically “cut corners” with connections in business and local politics. The cannibalization of *Monopoly* was not an arbitrary connection, but one that linked democracy and capitalism at a fundamental level.

The use of *Monopoly*-style boards equates the political process with capitalist expansion. This political-economic relationship is direct in *Who Can Beat Nixon?*, a game released in 1970, which regards states (and their electoral votes) as properties that are purchased and owned by candidates. In *Lie, Cheat, and Steal* the relationship is less direct, with votes instead being commodities traded between players. In this context, the votes are more closely related to the game’s currency than to the properties themselves. Since the electoral votes are up for sale and trade, this renders an individuals vote irrelevant. The subtext is clear: capitalism and democracy are linked, if not by design then by execution. Votes are nothing but a commodity traded to win the presidency. The expansion capitalism necessitates is transferred to politics via the *Monopoly*-style board and mechanics.



Lie, Cheat, and Steal game board. Image from Strong National Museum of Play



Left: *Who can Beat Nixon?* (1970) Game board



Right: *Presidential Campaign* (1979) game board (www.boardgamegeek.com)

Board Games, Elections, and Ideology

These changing portrayals of presidential politics mask the support both games give to the dominant capitalist ideology, and its marriage to the democratic process. In *Mr. President*, the support is as a mask. The game, while emerging from the liberal consensus and social upheavals of the time, adamantly denies that anything is amiss. Later games present the candidates as ultimately interchangeable. Unlike *Mr. President*, *Lie, Cheat, and Steal* presents a comical caricaturization of politics and politicians which serves to render as naive any challenge to the dominant ideology, a process which is masked beneath the layers of irony and satire. The connections between the capitalist system and the democratic government, denied and masked by *Mr. President*, are put on display as the main mechanic. If the game emerged from an era marked by distrust for politicians and a general knowledge of the corruption of politics, this game serves to naturalize that worldview as the only legitimate one and to dismiss any challenges to the system as childish.