AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1976

Jimmy Carter vs Gerald Ford

A 105-minute lesson on the 1976 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Cold War Realignment	ELECTORAL VOTES 538 total
WINNER Jimmy Carter (Democratic) · 297 EV	RUNNER-UP Gerald Ford (Republican) · 240 EV
KEY ISSUE Watergate aftermath; Nixon pardon; economic stagflation; Washington corruption	TURNOUT 54.8%

CONTENTS

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3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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1976: Jimmy Carter vs Gerald Ford

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

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in 1974-76 America that would produce an outsider Democratic victory. For each identify the specific 1973-76 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	1976 election was 48th U.S. presidential election. Carter 297 EV / Ford 240 EV. Carter 50.1% popular vote. Ford 1974-77 troubles: Nixon pardon Sept 1974; 1974-75 recession + stagflation; April 1975 fall of Saigon; May 1975 Mayaguez Incident; Church Committee CIA scandals; November 1975 NYC fiscal crisis; Sept 1975 assassination attempts. Republican primary 1976: Reagan challenged from right. Republican Convention Kansas City August 1976: Ford defeated Reagan 1187-1070 first ballot. Bob Dole VP. Democratic primary 1976 wide-open. Carter emerged through strategic planning. Won Iowa Jan 19, 1976 (first major political effect of Iowa caucuses); New Hampshire Feb 24, 1976; March 9 Florida against Wallace. Democratic Convention NY July 12-15, 1976 nominated Carter. Mondale VP. Carter campaign: trust + character + outsider. "I will never lie to you." October 6, 1976 second debate: Ford "no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe" gaffe. Refused to retract for 6 days. Carter 297 EV; Ford 240. Margin 1,683,247. Carter inaugurated January 20, 1977. Achievements: Camp David Accords September 1978; Panama Canal Treaties; China normalization January 1979; Department of Energy August 1977; Department of Education October 1979; deregulation; SALT II June 1979. Carter presidency damaged by three crises: stagflation (inflation 13.5% by 1980);

Iran hostage crisis November 1979 - January 1981 (444 days, 52 hostages); July 1979 "malaise speech."

1980 Reagan 489-49 EV landslide. Carter first incumbent president to lose since Hoover 1932.

1976 election structural significance: (1) Post-Watergate Americans wanted outsider trust. (2) Carter rebuilt Democratic Southern coalition McGovern 1972 had failed. (3) Structural inflection point between post-WWII Democratic dominance and Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance.

The Carter 1976-81 presidency was structurally consequential despite its political failure. The achievements: Camp David Accords (Egypt-Israel peace structurally unprecedented); Panama Canal Treaties (operationalized December 31, 1999 Canal handover); China normalization (US-China relations 45+ years operationalized); Department of Education (operationalizes federal education aid); deregulation (transportation industries restructured). Carter's post-presidential career was structurally remarkable: Carter Center 1982 (international election monitoring; disease eradication including 99.99% reduction of Guinea worm disease); Habitat for Humanity volunteer work; 2002 Nobel Peace Prize; longevity - Carter lived to age 100 (died December 29, 2024).

The Iran hostage crisis November 4, 1979 - January 20, 1981 was structurally pivotal. Iranian revolutionaries supporting Ayatollah Khomeini seized U.S. embassy in Tehran taking 52 American hostages. Carter's response - economic sanctions + frozen Iranian assets + diplomatic isolation - failed to free hostages. April 24, 1980 Operation Eagle Claw rescue attempt failed catastrophically: helicopter mechanical failures + sandstorm + helicopter-aircraft collision at Desert One staging site killed 8 American military personnel. The hostages were released minutes after Reagan's January 20, 1981 inauguration - a structurally humiliating timing that defined Carter's presidency in popular memory. Whether the timing was intentional (Iran-Reagan campaign coordination accusations) or coincidental remains historically contested.

The Carter 1976 victory can be analyzed retrospectively as the structural ending of the post-WWII Democratic-dominant era rather than as a Democratic restoration. The Republican-conservative coalition that Goldwater 1964 had inaugurated and Nixon 1972 had completed would resume in 1980 under Reagan. Carter's 1976 victory was structurally enabled by Watergate aftermath + Ford's pardon controversy + Carter's Southern Democratic identity + Republican primary divisions. Without these specific conditions, the Republican-conservative ascendance would have continued uninterrupted 1968-2008. The 1976 election was thus the structural last gasp of the New Deal Democratic coalition, briefly resurrected through a Southern Democratic candidate who could appeal to post-Watergate trust voters.

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**	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

Jimmy Carter
39th U.S. president (1977-81).

"Jimmy Who?"
June 1976 Time magazine cover phrase.

Iran hostage crisis
November 4, 1979 - January 20, 1981. 52 American hostages 444 days.

"Malaise speech"
July 15, 1979 Carter televised address.

Stagflation
1970s economic phenomenon: simultaneous high inflation (8-13%/year) + high unemployment (6-9%) + low GDP growth. Violated Keynesian Phillips-curve theory. Damaged Carter's 1980 re-election prospects.

Gerald Ford
38th U.S. president (1974-77).

Ford "no Soviet domination" gaffe
October 6, 1976 second Carter-Ford debate.

Camp David Accords
September 17, 1978 peace agreement between Egypt and Israel mediated by Carter.

Operation Eagle Claw
April 24, 1980 failed U.S. military attempt to rescue Iran hostages. Mechanical failures + sandstorm + helicopter-aircraft collision at Desert One killed 8 American military personnel.

Inaugural Address

JIMMY CARTER, JANUARY 20, 1977

Carter delivered his inaugural address from the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on January 20, 1977.

> *"For myself and for our Nation, I want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land. The American dream endures. We must once again have full faith in our country - and in one another. I believe America can be better. We can be even stronger than before. Let our recent mistakes bring a resurgent commitment to the basic principles of our Nation, for we know that if we despise our own government we have no future. Because we are free we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clearcut preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights. We do not seek to intimidate, but it is clear that a world which others can dominate with impunity would be inhospitable to decency and a threat to the well-being of all people. The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving and now demanding their place in the sun - not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights."*

Carter, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 1977). 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

Inaugural Address

JIMMY CARTER, JANUARY 20, 1977

“For myself and for our Nation, I want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land. The American dream endures. We must once again have full faith in our country - and in one another. I believe America can be better. We can be even stronger than before. Let our recent mistakes bring a resurgent commitment to the basic principles of our Nation, for we know that if we despise our own government we have no future. Because we are free we can never be indifferent to the fate of freedom elsewhere. Our moral sense dictates a clearcut preference for those societies which share with us an abiding respect for individual human rights. We do not seek to intimidate, but it is clear that a world which others can dominate with impunity would be inhospitable to decency and a threat to the well-being of all people. The world itself is now dominated by a new spirit. Peoples more numerous and more politically aware are craving and now demanding their place in the sun - not just for the benefit of their own physical condition, but for basic human rights.”

Carter, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 1977). Public domain.

SOURCE B

Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals ("Malaise Speech")

JIMMY CARTER, JULY 15, 1979

“I want to talk to you right now about a fundamental threat to American democracy. The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our Nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America. The confidence that we have always had as a people is not simply some romantic dream or a proverb in a dusty book that we read just on the Fourth of July. It is the idea which founded our Nation and has guided our development as a people.”

Carter, "Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals" (Washington, DC, July 15, 1979). Public domain.

The 1976 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 (Carter January 1977 inaugural) articulating post-Watergate healing. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Carter July 1979 "malaise" speech) articulating national psychological concerns. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources are Carter speeches but from different positions in his presidency. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Carter's "malaise speech" was politically devastating despite initial favorable response. Identify three structural reasons the speech became toxic by 1980.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific 1977-1981 Carter administration achievements + three specific 1977-1981 Carter administration failures.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many American hostages were held in Iran 1979-81?

( ) A. 39
( ) B. 52
( ) C. 67
( ) D. 83

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

On what date did the Iran hostages get released?

( ) A. November 4, 1980
( ) B. December 25, 1980
( ) C. January 20, 1981
( ) D. March 30, 1981

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1976 election about post-Watergate-trust, Southern-coalition, or inflection-point? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Carter's January 1977 inaugural address (Source A) articulated optimism about post-Watergate national healing - "I want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land." Carter's July 1979 "malaise speech" (Source B) articulated structural concerns about American national psychology - "a crisis of confidence." Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1968-1992 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1976 election represented (a) the post-Watergate demand for outsider trust over incumbent experience, (b) Carter's restoration of the Democratic Solid South coalition, or (c) the structural inflection point between post-WWII Democratic-dominant era and Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the post-Watergate-trust-vs-Southern-coalition-vs-inflection-point axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Watergate scandal, the Nixon pardon, Reagan's 1976 primary challenge, the Iran hostage crisis, the Camp David Accords, the Reagan 1980 election, the Bill Clinton 1992 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 want to thank my predecessor for all he has done to heal our land", "The American dream endures. We must once again have full faith in our country", "Let our recent mistakes bring a resurgent commitment to the basic principles of our Nation, for we know that if we despise our own government we have no future". The "I want to thank my predecessor" phrase is the most distinctive reconciliation framing.

Carter's framing established the post-Watergate healing posture.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will", "We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our Nation", "The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America". The "crisis of confidence" phrase is the most distinctive.

Carter's framing articulated structural concerns about national psychology.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Carter's 1977 inaugural - articulated as the incoming president to establish post-Watergate healing tone and outsider commitment to ethical governance. The function is to position the Carter presidency as a fresh start. Source B is Carter's 1979 mid-presidency address - articulated during the energy crisis to address structural national psychological concerns. The function is to mobilize national renewal through honest acknowledgment of problems rather than partisan blame. Together, the sources span Carter's 1977-79 trajectory: optimistic inauguration to mid-term psychological-crisis address. The structural arc: Carter's outsider commitment to honest governance produced both his 1977 inaugural eloquence and his 1979 "crisis of confidence" framing - both authentic to Carter's character but politically risky in different ways.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural arc.

QUESTION 4

Carter's "malaise speech" became politically devastating despite initial favorable response for three structural reasons: (1) Cabinet shake-up. On July 19-20, 1979 - just days after the speech - Carter fired or accepted resignations from 5 cabinet members (Joseph Califano HEW; Michael Blumenthal Treasury; Brock Adams Transportation; James Schlesinger Energy; Griffin Bell Justice). The shake-up made the speech appear chaotic rather than visionary. (2) Failure to operationalize. Carter's speech called for energy independence + national renewal but the specific policy follow-through was structurally weak. The 1979-80 stagflation continued; the November 1979 Iran hostage crisis began; the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan damaged détente; the 1980 election approached without structural recovery. (3) Republican counter-framing. Reagan's 1980 campaign explicitly attacked Carter's "malaise" framing with optimistic counter-rhetoric ("Morning in America"; "It's morning again in America"; "I want a country... where the dreams of the young have a chance to come true"). Reagan's framing successfully positioned Carter as pessimistic and Reagan as optimistic. (4) Voter sense of being blamed. Although Carter intended the "crisis of confidence" framing as an honest acknowledgment of national problems, voters increasingly interpreted it as Carter blaming them for the problems rather than offering leadership. The cumulative effect: by November 1980, "malaise" had become a politically toxic word that Reagan used against Carter. The structural lesson: presidential speeches articulating structural concerns can become politically damaging if subsequent policy follow-through fails to produce visible improvement.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural toxicity.

QUESTION 5

Three Carter administration achievements 1977-81: (1) Camp David Accords September 17, 1978. Carter mediated peace agreement between Egyptian President Sadat and Israeli PM Begin at Camp David Maryland. Sadat + Begin awarded 1978 Nobel Peace Prize. Operationalized through March 26, 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. Structural foundation of Middle East diplomacy for 45+ years. (2) Panama Canal Treaties September 7, 1977. Returned Canal to Panama by December 31, 1999. Ended structural U.S. colonial control of Canal Zone. (3) China normalization January 1, 1979. Established U.S.-PRC diplomatic relations; de-recognized Taiwan ROC. Operationalized Nixon's 1972 China opening into formal diplomatic relations. Three Carter administration failures 1977-81: (1) Stagflation. Inflation 13.5% (1980); unemployment 7.1% (1980); GDP -0.3% (1980 recession); prime interest rate 21.5% (December 1980). Volcker tight-money policy (Fed Chair Paul Volcker appointed by Carter August 1979) caused 1981-82 recession but eventually broke inflation. (2) Iran hostage crisis November 4, 1979 - January 20, 1981. 52 American hostages in U.S. embassy Tehran 444 days. April 24, 1980 Operation Eagle Claw rescue failed catastrophically (8 American military deaths at Desert One). Hostages released minutes after Reagan inauguration. (3) Soviet invasion of Afghanistan December 24, 1979 - structural collapse of détente. Carter responded with 1980 Olympic boycott + grain embargo + SALT II withdrawal from Senate consideration. Other failures: 1979 oil crisis; 1979-80 inflation; "malaise speech" controversy; Ted Kennedy 1980 primary challenge that damaged Carter's incumbent strength.

AP students should be able to articulate multiple achievements and failures.

QUESTION 6

52. 52 American hostages were held in U.S. embassy Tehran from November 4, 1979 to January 20, 1981 (444 days). The original hostage-taking group had been 66; 13 women and African Americans were released November 17-19, 1979 (Khomeini cited Islamic respect for women + sympathy for African American minorities); one (Richard Queen) was released July 11, 1980 due to medical condition (multiple sclerosis). 52 hostages remained for the remaining 14 months.

AP students should know the 52-hostage figure.

QUESTION 7

January 20, 1981. The Iran hostages were released minutes after Ronald Reagan's January 20, 1981 inauguration - 12:33 PM EST (the U.S. inauguration ceremony had ended at approximately 12:30 PM). The structurally humiliating timing defined Carter's presidency in popular memory. Whether the timing was intentional (Iran-Reagan campaign coordination accusations) or coincidental remains historically contested. The Algiers Accords January 19, 1981 had structurally finalized the hostage release; the timing was within Iran's control.

AP students should know the January 20, 1981 release date.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the post-Watergate-trust-vs-Southern-coalition-vs-inflection-point axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory.