1976

Jimmy Carter vs Gerald Ford

A 20-minute lesson on the 1976 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, 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%

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1976

Nixon resigned August 9, 1974. VP Gerald Ford became 38th president. Ford pardoned Nixon September 8, 1974 - "for all offenses against the United States" Nixon may have committed. The pardon was controversial. Many Americans felt Nixon should have faced trial. Ford's approval fell from 71% to 49%.

Ford governed 1974-77. He faced: high inflation (10%+ in 1974); high unemployment ("stagflation"); Vietnam War end (April 30, 1975 fall of Saigon); 1975 Helsinki Accords (recognized post-WWII European boundaries); CIA scandals (Church Committee 1975 investigations); 1975-76 New York City fiscal crisis.

Republicans renominated Ford 1976 over conservative challenger Ronald Reagan. Reagan had been California Governor 1967-75. He challenged Ford from the right. Reagan-Ford fight was close at August Kansas City convention - Ford won narrowly. Reagan would come back in 1980.

Democrats had wide-open field. Many candidates ran. Winner emerged: Jimmy Carter - 52-year-old Georgia peanut farmer and former Naval officer who had been Georgia Governor 1971-75. Carter was virtually unknown outside Georgia. Time magazine

cover June 1976: "Jimmy Who?"

Look at picture. That Jimmy Carter - the outsider who won in 1976.

Carter's campaign theme: trust + character. After Watergate Americans wanted honest leadership. Carter promised: "I will never lie to you." He emphasized his outsider status, religious faith (born-again Southern Baptist), and Southern roots.

Democratic Convention New York July 12-15, 1976 nominated Carter on 1st ballot. Sen Walter Mondale of Minnesota VP. Bicentennial summer = friendly mood. Convention united.

Campaign was close. Ford's incumbency + foreign-policy experience vs Carter's outsider trust. October 6, 1976 second debate - Ford famously claimed "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe." Politically devastating gaffe. Played into the trust-Carter narrative.

Election Day November 2, 1976: Carter 297 EV vs Ford 240. Popular vote: Carter 50.1% vs Ford 48.0% - narrow Carter win. Carter carried Southern states + Border states + selected Northeastern + Midwestern industrial states. Ford carried most of West Coast + Mountain West + rural Midwest + much of Northeast. Carter became 39th president.



Jimmy Carter, the 39th U.S. president. The outsider Georgia peanut farmer who won the 1976 election after Watergate.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 39th U.S. president after the 1976 election?

2.

What was unusual about Jimmy Carter's background?

3.

What was Ford's 1976 second-debate gaffe?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1976 - the year of America's Bicentennial 200th birthday - Americans elected Jimmy Carter. Carter was a peanut farmer from Georgia who had been governor. He was an outsider. After Watergate, Americans wanted someone they could trust.

Answer key

1.

Jimmy Carter. He won 297 electoral votes to Gerald Ford's 240. Popular vote: Carter 50.1% vs Ford 48.0%. Carter was the 39th U.S. president (1977-81). He was the first Deep South president since Zachary Taylor in 1848.

AP students should know Carter as 39th president.

2.

Carter's background was unusual in three structural ways: (1) Peanut farmer. Carter ran a peanut farm in Plains, Georgia inherited from his father. The farming background was politically distinctive for a presidential candidate. (2) Naval officer. Carter was a 1946 U.S. Naval Academy graduate. He served in the U.S. Navy submarine service 1946-53. He worked on the early nuclear submarine program under Admiral Hyman Rickover. (3) Born-again Southern Baptist. Carter was a devout evangelical Christian. He taught Sunday school for decades. His 1976 campaign explicitly emphasized his religious faith. (4) Outsider Southern Democrat. Carter had never served in Washington DC. His political career was Georgia State Senate (1963-67) + Georgia Governor (1971-75). The structural outsider status was politically valuable after Watergate. Time magazine June 1976 cover: "Jimmy Who?" - reflected his structural anonymity outside Georgia.

AP students should know Carter's background.

3.

Ford's 1976 second-debate gaffe was the "no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe" statement. October 6, 1976 second Carter-Ford debate at Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia. Moderator Max Frankel of the New York Times asked Ford about U.S.-Soviet relations regarding Eastern Europe and the Helsinki Accords. Ford responded: "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford administration." The statement was politically devastating because: (1) Obviously factually wrong. Soviet Union controlled Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria + maintained troops in those countries. (2) Ford had been intending to say that Eastern Europeans did not "consider themselves" dominated by Soviets - but his words came out wrong. (3) Frankel offered Ford a chance to clarify: "Did I understand you to say, sir, that the Russians are not using Eastern Europe as their own sphere of influence...?" Ford doubled down rather than walking it back. (4) Ford refused to retract the statement for 6 days. He finally clarified October 12, 1976 in a Dallas speech. (5) The gaffe played into the trust-Carter narrative. Voters questioned Ford's foreign-policy competence. (6) Some analysts argue the gaffe cost Ford the election (Ford lost by 2.1 percentage points in popular vote and 297-240 in EV; small swings in Ohio, Mississippi, or Hawaii could have flipped the EV result). The structural lesson: televised debate gaffes can structurally damage incumbent presidents.

AP students should know Ford's gaffe.