3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1980

Ronald Reagan vs Jimmy Carter

A 35-minute lesson on the 1980 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Cold War Realignment	ELECTORAL VOTES 538 total
WINNER Ronald Reagan (Republican) · 489 EV	RUNNER-UP Jimmy Carter (Democratic) · 49 EV
KEY ISSUE Iranian hostage crisis; stagflation; energy crisis; Reagan's conservative revolution	TURNOUT 54.2%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1980: Ronald Reagan vs Jimmy Carter

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Imagine you went to a restaurant and the prices were going up every week. How would that change how you and your family lived? Why might voters want to replace a president when prices are rising?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1980 election ended the Democratic Party's long control of the White House and launched the conservative movement in American politics. It was the first presidential election decided in a single direction by a major economic crisis since 1932. By 1980, the U.S. economy was in trouble. Inflation was running at 13.5 percent - prices of food, gas, and rent were going up so fast that families on fixed incomes were falling behind every month. Unemployment was 7.5 percent. Mortgage interest rates topped 14 percent. The combination of high inflation and high unemployment was so unusual that economists invented a new word for it: stagflation. Many Americans began to wonder whether the country's best days were behind it. Foreign affairs added to the gloom. On November 4, 1979, students supporting the Iranian revolution stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took 52 American diplomats hostage. President Jimmy Carter ordered a military rescue mission in April 1980. The mission failed when helicopters crashed in the desert; eight U.S. soldiers died. The hostages remained captive for the rest of the campaign - 444 days in total. Carter, a Democrat, faced a primary challenge from Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts. Carter won the nomination but emerged weakened. The Republican nominee was Ronald Reagan, the 69-year-old former governor of California and former Hollywood actor. Reagan had run twice before for the Republican nomination (1968 and 1976) without winning. In 1980 he locked it up early. He picked former CIA director George H.W. Bush as his running mate. Reagan's campaign focused on three themes. First, the economy: he promised to cut income taxes by 30 percent across three years and to deregulate businesses. Second, defense: he promised to rebuild the military after a decade of post-Vietnam cuts. Third, optimism: he promised that America's decline was a choice, not a fate. His most famous question to voters in the October 28 televised debate was: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" For most Americans the answer was no. Reagan won 489 electoral votes to Carter's 49. He carried 44 states, including the entire South, the West, and most of the Northeast. He won 50.7 percent of the popular vote to Carter's 41.0 percent, with independent John Anderson taking 6.6 percent. Republicans also took control of the Senate for the first time since 1955.

		The 1980 result is sometimes called the Reagan Revolution because it marked a turning point: federal tax rates would drop sharply, federal regulations would be cut, military spending would surge, and the conservative-vs-liberal divide that has defined American politics ever since was set in place.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1980 Election

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Key words

Inflation	The rate at which prices for goods and services go up over time. Inflation was 13.5 percent in 1980, meaning a $100 grocery cart cost $113.50 a year later.
Stagflation	The unusual economic situation of high inflation combined with high unemployment. Economists in the 1970s invented this word because their existing theories had assumed the two could not happen together.
Iran hostage crisis	The 1979-1981 episode in which Iranian students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held 52 American diplomats as hostages for 444 days. The hostages were released on the same day Reagan took office.
Deregulation	Removing federal rules that businesses have to follow. Reagan promised to deregulate airlines, banking, energy, and trucking. Critics worried that deregulation would lead to abuses.
Reagan Revolution	The name historians give to the conservative shift in American politics that began with Reagan's 1980 election. Includes lower taxes, deregulation, military spending increases, and a new conservative political coalition.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Ronald Reagan receive in 1980?

( ) A. 277
( ) B. 378
( ) C. 489
( ) D. 525

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

What is stagflation? Why was it a problem for President Carter's re-election?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was the Iran hostage crisis a political disaster for Jimmy Carter?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify two specific promises Reagan made during the 1980 campaign.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

489. Reagan won 489 electoral votes; Carter won 49; John Anderson 0 (with 6.6 percent of the popular vote).

Reagan's 1980 victory was one of the largest postwar landslides. His 1984 re-election would be even bigger (525-13).

QUESTION 2

Stagflation is the unusual situation when inflation and unemployment are both high at the same time. Old economic theories had assumed one would balance the other. It was a political disaster for Carter because Americans were experiencing rising prices AND lost jobs at the same time - and his administration did not have a clear response.

Stagflation is the central economic concept of the late 1970s. The fact that economists had no clear theory of how to fix it sapped public confidence in Democratic economic management.

QUESTION 3

Iranian students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and took 52 American diplomats hostage. They held the hostages for 444 days - through the rest of the 1980 campaign. Carter ordered a military rescue mission in April 1980 that failed when helicopters crashed in the desert and eight U.S. soldiers died. The hostages' continued captivity made Carter look weak and unable to protect American citizens. The hostages were released on January 20, 1981 - the day Reagan took office.

The hostage crisis dominated the second half of the 1980 campaign. The timing of the release on Reagan's inauguration day is one of the great political moments in postwar U.S. history.

QUESTION 4

Accept any two of: (1) Cut income taxes 30 percent across three years. (2) Rebuild the military after post-Vietnam cuts. (3) Deregulate businesses (airlines, banking, energy, trucking). (4) Balance the federal budget. (5) Reduce the size of the federal government. (6) Get the American hostages home from Iran.

Reagan's 1980 campaign was disciplined: a small number of promises repeated relentlessly. The 1981 tax cut and the military buildup were the two largest delivered policies.