1980

Ronald Reagan vs Jimmy Carter

A 50-minute lesson on the 1980 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

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3. Background: key terms + source
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1980: Ronald Reagan vs Jimmy Carter

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two political conditions you would expect to make voters willing to take a chance on a candidate from the other party. For each, suggest one specific 1980-era event that fits the pattern.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1980 election was the largest presidential landslide of the postwar era and the most consequential ideological realignment since 1932. Ronald Reagan won 489 electoral votes to Jimmy Carter's 49 and carried 44 states. The Republican coalition Reagan built in 1980 - religious conservatives, working-class whites alienated from the cultural left, anti-Communist defense hawks, and supply-side economists - would dominate national politics for the next twelve years and shape the Republican Party for the next forty. The immediate cause was Carter's collapsing political situation. By the summer of 1980, four crises had converged. First, the economy: inflation was running at 13.5 percent, the highest since 1947. Mortgage interest rates topped 14 percent. Unemployment was 7.5 percent. The combination of high inflation and high unemployment - stagflation - had no precedent in Keynesian economic theory, leaving Carter's economists without a coherent response. Second, the Iran hostage crisis. On November 4, 1979, Iranian students supporting the Khomeini revolution seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took 52 American diplomats hostage. Carter ordered a military rescue mission - Operation Eagle Claw - in April 1980. The mission failed when helicopters collided in the Iranian desert; eight U.S. soldiers died. The hostages remained captive for the rest of the campaign. ABC News launched a nightly program counting the days of captivity (Nightline, hosted by Ted Koppel) that became an unintended political weapon against Carter. Third, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 ended the era of detente. Carter responded with a grain embargo and a U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Conservatives argued these responses were inadequate. The Cold War was suddenly hot again, and Carter's reputation as a foreign-policy weakling solidified. Fourth, Carter faced a primary challenge from Senator Edward Kennedy of Massa-

chusetts. Kennedy lost but exposed deep dissatisfaction within the Democratic Party with Carter's leadership. The August 1980 Democratic convention in New York City was unenthusiastic. Carter emerged the nominee but a weakened one.

The Republican nominee was former California Governor Ronald Reagan, then 69 years old. Reagan had run twice before (1968 and 1976) without winning the nomination. His 1980 campaign assembled a new conservative coalition that historians now call the Reagan Revolution. The pieces included: the New Right (Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, Paul Weyrich's Heritage Foundation, Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority); supply-side economists (Arthur Laffer's tax-cut theory); anti-Communist defense intellectuals (the Committee on the Present Danger); and the working-class white voters Nixon had begun mobilizing in 1968 as the silent majority.

Reagan's 1980 campaign was strategically disciplined. He promised three specific things: cut income tax rates 30 percent across three years (the Kemp-Roth bill); rebuild the military with a five-year spending increase; and deregulate airlines, banking, energy, and trucking. His campaign maintained a positive tone, framing American decline as a choice rather than a fate. His most famous moment came in the October 28 televised debate, when he turned to viewers and asked: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" Polling shifted decisively to Reagan in the final week.

On election day Reagan won the popular vote 50.7 percent to 41.0 percent, with independent John Anderson taking 6.6 percent. The electoral count was 489 to 49. The Reagan coalition flipped Northern industrial states like Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania that had voted Democratic since 1932 - the Reagan Democrats. The South, which had begun moving Republican in 1968, completed the realignment in 1980. Republicans took control of the Senate (53-46), their first majority since 1955. The Reagan Revolution would deliver the 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act (a 25 percent across-the-board tax cut), a five-year defense buildup that pushed Pentagon spending from $134 billion to $282 billion, and a sharp partisan polarization of American politics that has continued ever since.

10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

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

Stagflation

The unusual 1970s combination of high inflation and high unemployment. Keynesian economic theory had assumed the two could not coexist, leaving the Carter administration without a coherent response.

Detente

The 1970s diplomatic policy of reducing tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The Soviet 1979 invasion of Afghanistan ended detente; Reagan's 1980 campaign explicitly rejected it as a Cold War strategy.

Supply-side economics

The economic theory, popularized by Arthur Laffer in the late 1970s, that lower tax rates would generate enough new economic activity to increase total tax revenue. Underlay Reagan's 30-percent tax-cut promise.

Iran hostage crisis

The 1979-1981 episode in which 52 U.S. diplomats were held captive at the U.S. embassy in Tehran for 444 days. The hostages were released on January 20, 1981, the day Reagan took office.

New Right

The 1970s movement that organized conservative Christians, anti-tax activists, and anti-feminist groups into a unified political force. Key institutions: Schlafly's Eagle Forum, Weyrich's Heritage Foundation, Falwell's Moral Majority.

Reagan Democrats

The Northern industrial working-class voters who had voted Democratic since 1932 but voted for Reagan in 1980 and 1984. Concentrated in Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Macomb County, Michigan. Symbol of the conservative realignment.

First Inaugural Address

RONALD REAGAN, JANUARY 20, 1981

Reagan was sworn in at the West Front of the U.S. Capitol on January 20, 1981. The Iran hostages were released within an hour of his oath. The address framed the new administration in explicit contrast to Democratic governance: the government was the problem, not the solution.

> *"In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we have been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden. The solutions we seek must be equitable, with no one group singled out to pay a higher price."*

Reagan, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 1981). Public domain.

The 1980 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Ronald Reagan win in 1980?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which famous question did Reagan ask viewers in the October 28, 1980, debate?

( ) A. Where's the beef?
( ) B. Are you better off than you were four years ago?
( ) C. Read my lips
( ) D. Tear down this wall

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the four crises that converged to weaken Carter politically by the summer of 1980.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Reagan says in the excerpt that "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." Explain what political message he was sending and how it differed from Roosevelt and Johnson's framings of federal power.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific policy promises Reagan made during the 1980 campaign and indicate which were delivered in his first two years.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1980 election map, identify the six states Carter managed to carry. What pattern do they share, and what does the pattern tell you about the Democratic coalition by 1980?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

489. Reagan 489; Carter 49; John Anderson 0. The popular vote was 50.7% to 41.0% to 6.6%.

Reagan's 1980 result was the largest presidential landslide since 1972 (Nixon-McGovern). His 1984 re-election would be even larger (525-13).

QUESTION 2

Are you better off than you were four years ago?

The line came at the end of Reagan's closing statement in the October 28 debate. It is now a fixed feature of every modern presidential debate and a standard test for incumbent re-election bids.

QUESTION 3

(1) Inflation at 13.5 percent + mortgage rates topping 14 percent. (2) The Iran hostage crisis dragging on through the campaign. (3) The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 ending detente. (4) Senator Edward Kennedy's primary challenge exposing intra-party dissatisfaction.

Any one of the four would have damaged a normal re-election. Together they made it nearly impossible. AP students should recognize that incumbent-disadvantage compounds across multiple simultaneous crises.

QUESTION 4

Reagan was signaling that the New Deal-Great Society framework - which treated the federal government as the primary agent for solving social and economic problems - had reached its limit. Roosevelt's 1933 Inaugural had framed the federal government as the rescuer of a paralyzed economy; Johnson's 1965 Great Society had framed federal programs as the path to ending poverty. Reagan's 1981 inversion treated federal action itself as the obstacle, opening the way for tax cuts, deregulation, and a permanent rollback of the welfare state. The framing defined American conservative ideology for the next four decades.

The Reagan-FDR-LBJ axis is the standard rhetorical genealogy for 20th-century American political ideology. AP students should be able to articulate the contrast.

QUESTION 5

Promises: (1) Cut income tax rates 30 percent across three years (Kemp-Roth). (2) Rebuild the military with a five-year defense spending increase. (3) Deregulate airlines, banking, energy, and trucking. (4) Balance the federal budget. (5) Reduce the size of the federal government. Delivered: (1) The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 delivered a 25 percent across-the-board cut. (2) Defense spending rose from $134 billion (1980) to $282 billion (1986). (3) Deregulation continued the trajectory begun under Carter; airline deregulation had been completed in 1978. (4) NOT delivered - the federal deficit grew, not shrank. (5) Partially delivered - some agencies cut, but federal employment ultimately grew during Reagan's terms.

The gap between Reagan's deficit-reduction promise and his deficit-expanding tax cuts is the central historical critique of supply-side economics. AP students should be able to identify both delivered and undelivered commitments.

QUESTION 6

Carter carried six states plus DC: Georgia (Carter's home state), Hawaii, Maryland, Minnesota (Walter Mondale's home state), Rhode Island, West Virginia, plus DC. The pattern: Carter's coalition by 1980 was reduced to home-state loyalty and a few historic Democratic strongholds. The traditional Roosevelt coalition - urban ethnic Catholics, Northern industrial workers, the Solid South - had cracked open. The 1980 map is the visual proof of the conservative realignment.

Carter's six-state coalition is the smallest for a Democratic incumbent in the postwar era. The fact that he barely held his home state shows how completely the New Deal coalition had broken by 1980.