CLASSROOM EDITION · GRADES 9 — 12

1980

Ronald Reagan vs Jimmy Carter

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1980: Ronald Reagan vs Jimmy Carter

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1980 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1980 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: list two issues that you would expect to be politically decisive when both inflation and unemployment are rising at the same time. Identify which party you think benefits from that environment, and why.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1980 election sent Republican Ronald Reagan to the White House with 489 electoral votes to incumbent President Jimmy Carter's 49. The independent candidacy of Republican congressman John B. Anderson drew 6.6 percent of the popular vote but no electoral votes. The campaign was dominated by stagflation (simultaneous double-digit inflation and rising unemployment), the Iran hostage crisis (Americans had been held at the U.S. embassy in Tehran for over a year on Election Day), and Reagan's steady debate performance asking voters Are you better off than you were four years ago. Reagan won 44 states, including traditionally Democratic strongholds across the South and industrial Midwest. The election is widely treated as the end of the New Deal era and the beginning of a conservative governing coalition that shaped American politics for at least a generation. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1980 election tells you about the Cold War Realignment era that the textbook didn't?"

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 simultaneous occurrence of high inflation and high unemployment. Standard postwar economic models treated these as opposites; the 1970s broke that assumption.

Reagan Democrats
White working-class voters who had backed Democrats from FDR through 1976 but switched to Reagan in 1980. Concentrated in industrial Midwest and Catholic ethnic enclaves.

Moral Majority
Jerry Falwell's 1979 evangelical political organization, instrumental in mobilizing conservative Protestant voters for Reagan in 1980.

Iran hostage crisis
The 444-day captivity of 52 Americans seized at the U.S. embassy in Tehran (November 1979 – January 1981). A defining backdrop of the 1980 campaign.

Supply-side economics
The 1970s–80s theory that cutting marginal tax rates stimulates economic growth enough to recover most of the lost revenue. Central to Reagan's 1981 tax cuts.

New Deal era
The 1933–1980 period of generally expanding federal government in U.S. politics, during which Democrats won seven of twelve presidential races. Most analysts treat 1980 as its endpoint.

First Inaugural Address (excerpt)

RONALD REAGAN, JANUARY 20, 1981

Reagan's inaugural broke explicitly with the New Deal political tradition. By coincidence, Iran released the 52 American hostages on Inauguration Day, allowing Reagan to begin his presidency with a foreign-policy reset he did not have to negotiate.

> *"In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've 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?"*

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

The 1980 Election

Read the background page (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Ronald Reagan win in 1980?

( ) A. 332
( ) B. 407
( ) C. 489
( ) D. 525

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Define stagflation in one sentence and explain why it was politically toxic for an incumbent president.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How long had American hostages been held at the U.S. embassy in Iran on Election Day 1980?

( ) A. Three months
( ) B. Six months
( ) C. Roughly one year
( ) D. Over two years

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

List two groups that broke from prior Democratic loyalty to support Reagan in 1980. For each, identify one specific issue that drove the switch.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

On the 1980 map, identify the six states Carter managed to carry. What does the geographic pattern reveal about the residual Democratic coalition in 1980?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the exact phrase in the excerpt where Reagan makes the central claim of his inaugural about the role of federal government. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

Roosevelt argued in his 1933 First Inaugural Address that bold federal action could end the Depression. Reagan in this 1981 excerpt argues the opposite — that government is itself the cause of the crisis. Identify two specific ways their assumptions about the relationship between citizen and federal state differ, and one assumption they share. Cite a phrase from the Reagan excerpt.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

489

Reagan won 489 electoral votes; Carter 49 (six states plus DC). The popular vote was 50.8 to 41.0 to 6.6 percent.

QUESTION 2

Stagflation is the combination of high inflation and high unemployment. Standard policy tools work against each other: tightening to fight inflation worsens unemployment, and stimulus to fight unemployment worsens inflation, so an incumbent appears unable to act effectively on either front.

The 1970s broke postwar economic models that treated inflation and unemployment as a tradeoff. Volcker's 1979 interest-rate hikes eventually defeated inflation but worsened the 1980–82 recession.

QUESTION 3

Roughly one year

The Iran hostage crisis began November 4, 1979 — exactly one year before Election Day. The hostages were released on January 20, 1981, the day Reagan was inaugurated.

QUESTION 4

Accept two of: white evangelical Christians (abortion, school prayer); union members (inflation, perceived foreign-policy weakness); Catholic ethnic voters (cultural issues, taxes); Southern white voters (cultural conservatism, completing the Southern Strategy realignment); suburban professionals (taxes, regulation).

Reagan Democrats — a coined term — described white working-class voters who switched in 1980 and stayed Republican for a generation.

QUESTION 5

Carter carried six states (Georgia, Hawaii, Maryland, Minnesota, Rhode Island, West Virginia) plus the District of Columbia. Accept any list of those six states; if a student also lists DC, accept that as a bonus correct entry — DC has 3 electoral votes but is not a state, so the question's "six states" count refers to states only.

The lack of a region tells you the Democratic coalition had no geographic floor in 1980 — every region had broken to some extent. By 1984 it would get worse: Mondale carried only Minnesota and DC.

QUESTION 6

Accept: "In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem." — or any verbatim subset that names government as the problem.

The semicolon construction was deliberate; the line works both as a slogan ("government is the problem") and as a longer rhetorical claim about the current crisis specifically.

QUESTION 7

Differences (accept any two of): FDR treats federal capacity as a tool of recovery, Reagan as the obstacle to recovery; FDR positions citizens as needing federal protection, Reagan as needing protection from federal overreach; FDR's program was expansion (CCC, AAA, SEC), Reagan's was retrenchment (deregulation, tax cuts, federal hiring freeze). Shared assumption: both treat the presidency as the lever for transforming the relationship between citizen and federal state — both inaugurals are explicitly programmatic, not merely ceremonial. Accept any quoted Reagan phrase plus a defensible parallel.

Reagan voted for FDR four times and modeled his delivery style on him, even while reversing his policy direction. The structural similarity in how the two inaugurals position the office is often noted in rhetorical-history scholarship.

Discussion prompts

1. Reagan asked voters Are you better off than you were four years ago. Identify two reasons that framing was so effective in 1980 and one reason it has been less effective in subsequent elections that have tried to copy it.

2. Carter faced the Iran hostage crisis throughout the final year of his term. How does foreign policy failure interact with domestic discontent to produce a wave election, and what other cycles show the same dynamic?

3. John Anderson won 6.6 percent of the popular vote with zero electoral votes. What does that disparity tell you about the structural barriers to third-party candidates, and what reforms could change it?