AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1980

Ronald Reagan vs Jimmy Carter

A 105-minute lesson on the 1980 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 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

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3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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1980: Ronald Reagan vs Jimmy Carter

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 1980 that would have produced a conservative realignment regardless of which Republican candidate had been nominated. For each, identify the specific 1970s-era development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1980 election completed the conservative realignment that had begun under Nixon in 1968 and consolidated the new Republican coalition that would dominate American politics through 2008. Ronald Reagan won 489 electoral votes to Jimmy Carter's 49 - the largest non-incumbent victory of the postwar era. Carter became the first elected Democratic president to lose re-election since Grover Cleveland in 1888. The 1980 result was simultaneously a referendum on Carter, a verdict on the post-Vietnam Democratic governance project, and a structural shift in the American electoral coalition. The context was four simultaneous crises. The first was economic. Inflation had run above 6 percent every year since 1973; in 1980 it reached 13.5 percent, the highest non-wartime rate in U.S. history. The Federal Reserve under Paul Volcker began aggressively raising interest rates in October 1979 to break inflation - the federal funds rate would peak at 19.1 percent in 1981 - inducing the deep 1981-82 recession. By the 1980 campaign, mortgage rates topped 14 percent and unemployment was rising. The stagflation problem had no Keynesian theoretical response, leaving the Carter administration ideologically disarmed. The second crisis was the Iran hostage situation. On November 4, 1979, Iranian students supporting the Khomeini revolution seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took 52 American diplomats hostage. The Carter administration's April 1980 rescue attempt - Operation Eagle Claw - failed when helicopters collided in the Iranian desert, killing eight servicemen and aborting the mission. ABC News launched Nightline as a nightly chronicle of the hostage crisis; the program became an unintended chronicle of Carter's political weakness. The hostages would not be released until January 20, 1981 - the day Reagan took office, by negotiated agreement that Carter's team had completed but that the Iranians timed deliberately to humiliate Carter. The third crisis was the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The invasion

ended the detente policy that had structured U.S.-Soviet relations since 1972. Carter responded with the grain embargo, the 1980 Moscow Olympics boycott, and a re-escalation of defense spending. Conservatives - led by the Committee on the Present Danger - argued the responses were inadequate and that detente itself had been a strategic error. The Cold War was suddenly back at full intensity, and Carter's post-Vietnam doctrine of self-restraint was politically discredited.

The fourth crisis was intra-party. Senator Edward Kennedy challenged Carter in the 1980 Democratic primaries. Kennedy lost narrowly but exposed deep elite Democratic dissatisfaction with Carter's leadership. The August 1980 Democratic convention in New York was visibly divided; Kennedy's concession speech was more memorable than Carter's acceptance.

Reagan's 1980 campaign was the culmination of a fifteen-year conservative institutional buildup. The New Right - including Phyllis Schlafly's 1972-launched Stop ERA campaign, Paul Weyrich's 1973-founded Heritage Foundation, Jerry Falwell's 1979 Moral Majority, Richard Viguerie's direct-mail fundraising operation, and the broader network of conservative think tanks (AEI, Cato, Manhattan Institute) - had built the policy infrastructure, political vocabulary, and grassroots organization the Reagan campaign now deployed. Arthur Laffer's supply-side economics, articulated through the 1978 Kemp-Roth tax bill, provided the economic-policy core. The Committee on the Present Danger, founded in 1976, provided the defense-policy core.

The campaign was strategically disciplined. Reagan made three specific promises: a 30 percent income-tax-rate cut across three years (Kemp-Roth); a five-year defense buildup; and deregulation of airlines, banking, energy, and trucking. He avoided specifics on social issues, leaving the New Right to mobilize evangelical voters on his behalf without his explicit involvement. His campaign maintained a relentlessly positive tone framing American decline as a choice rather than a fate. The October 28 debate was the decisive moment: Reagan's closing question "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" reframed the election as a referendum on Carter's record rather than a choice between competing visions. Polling shifted decisively in Reagan's favor in the final week.

On election day Reagan won 50.7 percent of the popular vote to Carter's 41.0 percent and John Anderson's 6.6 percent. The electoral count was 489 to 49. Republicans took control of the Senate 53-46, their first majority since 1955. Reagan flipped Northern industrial states (Ohio, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Illinois) that had voted Democratic in every cycle since 1932 - the Reagan Democrats. The Solid South's shift to the Republican column, which had begun under Goldwater in 1964 and Wallace in 1968, was now complete: Reagan carried every Southern state except Carter's home Georgia.

The Reagan administration delivered most of the promised program. The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 cut income tax rates 25 percent across three years

		(slightly less than the campaign promise) and indexed brackets to inflation. The 1986 Tax Reform Act simplified the code and dropped the top rate to 28 percent. Defense spending rose from $134 billion in 1980 to $282 billion in 1986. The Federal Communications Commission, the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the Civil Aeronautics Board were deregulated or eliminated. The federal deficit, however, grew from $74 billion (1980) to $221 billion (1986); the supply-side prediction that lower taxes would increase total revenue did not survive contact with reality. Reagan's 1981 air-traffic-controller strike-breaking established a precedent against organized labor that contributed to the long decline of union membership. Historians now treat 1980 as the completion of the conservative realignment that 1968 had begun. The new Republican coalition - religious conservatives, working-class white men, anti-Communist defense intellectuals, supply-side economists, and Sun Belt suburbanites - would deliver Republican victories in 1980, 1984, 1988, 2000, and 2004. The conservative-vs-liberal ideological divide that defined American politics from 1980 onward was not the natural state of American party competition; it was an institutional achievement of the 1960s-1970s conservative movement, ratified at the ballot box in 1980.
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

Stagflation

The 1970s combination of high inflation and high unemployment. Keynesian theory had assumed the two could not coexist; their coexistence left Democratic economists ideologically disarmed and opened the political space for Reagan's supply-side alternative.

Kemp-Roth bill

The 1978 Republican tax bill, drafted by Representative Jack Kemp and Senator William Roth, proposing a 30-percent across-the-board cut in federal income-tax rates over three years. Articulated supply-side economic theory in legislative form. Most of its provisions became law in the 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act.

Reagan Democrats

The Northern industrial working-class voters who had voted Democratic since 1932 but voted Republican in 1980 and 1984. Concentrated in Macomb County, Michigan and analogous Rust Belt working-class areas. The label was popularized by Stanley Greenberg's 1985 study.

Sun Belt

The arc of states from California through Texas to Florida that grew rapidly in population, economic weight, and electoral votes in the 1960s-1980s. The Sun Belt's rise reshaped the electoral map and contributed to the conservative coalition's 1968-1980 consolidation.

Reagan Revolution

The conservative ideological and policy realignment of the 1980-1989 Reagan presidency: lower marginal tax rates, deregulation, a five-year defense buildup, and a sustained partisan polarization of American politics.

Volcker shock

Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker's October 1979 decision to use sharp interest-rate increases to break inflation. The federal funds rate peaked at 19.1 percent in 1981. Triggered the 1981-82 recession but achieved disinflation by 1983; the inflation rate fell from 13.5% (1980) to 3.2% (1983).

Moral Majority

Jerry Falwell's 1979-founded organization that mobilized conservative Protestant evangelicals into Republican electoral politics. Symbol of the New Right's religious mobilization. Critical to Reagan's 1980 victory in the South.

Committee on the Present Danger

The 1976-revived bipartisan organization (originally founded in 1950) that argued Soviet military buildup outpaced U.S. capability and that detente had been a strategic error. Provided the defense-policy infrastructure for Reagan's 1980 campaign and first-term policy.

Air traffic controllers strike

The August 1981 strike by the PATCO union of federal air traffic controllers. Reagan fired 11,345 striking controllers and banned them from federal service for life. Symbol of the new federal-government posture against organized labor; widely credited as accelerating the long decline of union membership.

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 first inauguration held at the West Front). The Iran hostages were released within an hour of his oath - by deliberate Iranian timing. The address framed the new administration in explicit contrast to Democratic governance.

> *"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.

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

First Inaugural Address

RONALD REAGAN, JANUARY 20, 1981

"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.

SOURCE B

Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals (Crisis of Confidence 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 political fabric of America."

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

The 1980 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 (Reagan's First Inaugural) that articulates the new conservative diagnosis of the American problem. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Carter's 1979 speech) that diagnoses the American problem as spiritual rather than structural. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address American decline, but they characterize its cause differently. Identify the specific cause each source names.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was delivered in July 1979 - sixteen months before the 1980 election. What does the temporal gap tell you about whether Carter's 1979 framing was a cause of his 1980 loss or a symptom of the broader political conditions that produced it?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A frames federal government as the problem rather than the solution. Identify one specific 1970s development that had eroded confidence in federal capacity and prepared voters to accept this framing.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker's October 1979 decision to use sharp interest-rate increases to break inflation is known as:

( ) A. The Greenspan put
( ) B. The Volcker shock
( ) C. The Carter pivot
( ) D. The supply shock

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1979 organization mobilized conservative Protestant evangelicals into the Republican electoral coalition?

( ) A. Christian Coalition
( ) B. Moral Majority
( ) C. Focus on the Family
( ) D. Family Research Council

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1980 result a verdict on Carter's diagnosis or on his solutions? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Carter's 1979 Crisis of Confidence speech (Source B) diagnoses the American problem as a spiritual and psychological one - a loss of national will. Reagan's 1981 Inaugural (Source A) diagnoses the same problem as a structural one - federal government overreach paralyzing private initiative. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1973-1981 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1980 result was a verdict on Carter's diagnosis of the American problem versus a verdict on his proposed solutions. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the diagnosis-vs-solutions axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the OPEC oil shocks, the Iran hostage crisis, the Volcker shock, the Kennedy primary challenge, the Moral Majority mobilization. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent - diagnosis vs. solutions - rather than treating them as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem", "All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden", "society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule". The first phrase is the defining one.

The "government is the problem" line is the rhetorical kernel of the entire Reagan Revolution. AP students should recognize it as defining the next forty years of American conservative ideology.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "a fundamental threat to American democracy", "a crisis of confidence", "a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will", "the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives". The "crisis of confidence" phrase gave the speech its informal title.

Carter's "malaise" framing - the speech is widely called the malaise speech although the word never appears in it - is one of the most-analyzed rhetorical failures of postwar U.S. political history.

QUESTION 3

Source A names federal government overreach: a too-large, too-complex bureaucracy that has displaced civic self-governance and private initiative. Source B names a loss of national will: a spiritual erosion of confidence and purpose that no policy can directly address. The two framings are politically incompatible: the first calls for structural reform, the second calls for spiritual renewal.

The two framings produce opposite policy responses. Source A calls for tax cuts and deregulation; Source B calls for collective sacrifice and lowered expectations. Reagan's framing was more politically actionable in 1980; Carter's was more accurate but less mobilizing.

QUESTION 4

The July 1979 framing predated the November 1979 hostage seizure and the December 1979 Soviet invasion. Carter's "crisis of confidence" diagnosis was an intellectual analysis of American decline that the subsequent events superficially seemed to confirm but actually transformed: the crisis was no longer just a vague spiritual malaise but a concrete sequence of foreign-policy failures. The temporal ordering tells you that Carter's 1979 diagnosis was the trigger of his political collapse, not a response to it: his framing convinced Americans that the problem was serious, but then his solutions failed to address the concrete crises that followed.

The structural argument here is that Carter named the problem accurately but proposed no actionable solutions. Reagan's 1980 campaign borrowed the diagnosis (American decline is real) but substituted a different solution (federal rollback rather than collective sacrifice).

QUESTION 5

Accept any of: (1) Watergate (1972-1974) - the Nixon administration's abuse of federal power. (2) The Vietnam War's misrepresentations - federal officials systematically lying about military progress. (3) Stagflation - federal economists' inability to manage the economy. (4) The OPEC oil shocks (1973, 1979) - federal energy policy's exposed inadequacy. (5) The 1976 Church Committee revelations - federal intelligence agencies' systematic abuse of citizens. (6) The 1980 Operation Eagle Claw failure - federal military's inability to rescue the hostages. Watergate is the strongest single answer.

The 1970s federal-government legitimacy crisis is the precondition for the 1980 conservative breakthrough. AP students should be able to identify the cumulative effect of multiple 1970s federal failures.

QUESTION 6

The Volcker shock.

Volcker's October 1979 announcement that the Fed would use monetary aggregates rather than interest-rate targets caused the federal funds rate to spike to 19.1 percent in 1981. The 1981-82 recession was a direct consequence; so was the disinflation that allowed Reagan's second-term economic recovery.

QUESTION 7

Moral Majority.

Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority was founded in June 1979. It mobilized conservative Protestant evangelicals - previously a politically inert constituency - into the Republican coalition. By 1980 it had registered 4 million new voters. Its mobilization was decisive in Reagan's Southern landslide.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the diagnosis-vs-solutions axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric on the next page evaluates the full essay.