3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1984

Ronald Reagan vs Walter Mondale

A 35-minute lesson on the 1984 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) · 525 EV	RUNNER-UP Walter Mondale (Democratic) · 13 EV
KEY ISSUE Economic recovery; Reagan Revolution; deficit spending; nuclear arms race	TURNOUT 55.2%

CONTENTS

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

1984: Ronald Reagan vs Walter Mondale

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a president's first-term policies appear to be working, what political conditions can produce a 49-state landslide re-election?
15 min	**Reading**	1984 election was 50th U.S. presidential election. Produced Reagan's 525-13 EV victory over Democrat Walter Mondale - one of biggest electoral landslides in U.S. history (tied Nixon 1972). Reagan's 58.8% popular vote was structurally close to LBJ 1964 (61.1%) and Nixon 1972 (60.7%). Election structurally shaped by 1983-84 economic recovery, Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign, Mondale's structurally weak candidacy (first woman VP nominee + commitment to raise taxes), Cold War tensions, and Jesse Jackson Rainbow Coalition campaign. Political conditions had been transformed by Reagan's 1981-84 first term. Reagan had won 1980 with 489-49 EV + 50.7% popular vote against Carter during stagflation + Iran hostage crisis. Reagan's first-term agenda: (1) Tax cuts. August 1981 Economic Recovery Tax Act (ERTA) - 23% across-the-board income tax reduction phased over 3 years; top marginal rate fell from 70% to 50%. (2) Deregulation - building on Carter's 1978-80 deregulation, Reagan expanded to financial services + telecommunications + broadcasting + environmental + labor + drug regulation. (3) Defense buildup. Defense spending rose from $158B (1981) to $304B (1989) - largest peacetime defense buildup in U.S. history. (4) Tight monetary policy. Fed Chair Paul Volcker (Carter appointee, reappointed by Reagan 1983) had broken inflation through 1981-82 recession (prime rate reached 21.5% December 1980; unemployment 10.8% November 1982). (5) Domestic spending cuts. Welfare programs (AFDC, food stamps, Medicaid) faced restrictions; military and Social Security largely preserved. (6) Federal regulatory rollback (EPA, OSHA, FCC, FDA). Reagan 1981-84 first-term events: (1) August 5, 1981 PATCO strike - Reagan fired ~11,345 air traffic controllers who had struck illegally. Politically transformative. Demonstrated Reagan's willingness to confront unions; weakened labor movement structurally. (2) August 13, 1981 ERTA signed at Rancho del Cielo (Reagan's California ranch). (3) October 1981 Reagan emergency hospitalization for colon cancer surgery. (4) March 30, 1981 assassination attempt by John Hinckley Jr. - Reagan shot in chest at Washington Hilton. Press Secretary James Brady shot in head (paralyzed for life). Reagan recovered. (5) 1981-82 recession - Volcker tight money broke inflation but caused 10.8% unemployment + ~$1T GDP loss. (6) 1983-84 economic recovery - GDP grew 4.6% (1983) + 7.2% (1984; best since 1951); unemployment 7.5% (1984) from 10.8% (1982); inflation 4.3% (1984) from 13.5% (1980). (7) March 8, 1983 "Evil Empire" speech (National Association of Evangelicals; Reagan called Soviet Union "evil empire"). (8) March 23, 1983 SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative,

"Star Wars") speech - proposed space-based anti-missile defense. (9) September 1, 1983 KAL 007 shot down by Soviet fighter (269 dead including U.S. Rep Larry McDonald). (10) October 23, 1983 Beirut barracks bombing - 241 U.S. Marines killed in suicide truck bombing. Reagan withdrew Marines February 1984. (11) October 25, 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada (Operation Urgent Fury). 19 U.S. military deaths. (12) January 1, 1984 break-up of AT&T - largest corporate break-up in U.S. history.

Republican National Convention met in Dallas August 20-23, 1984 and renominated Reagan-Bush by acclamation. Slogan: "Bringing America back" + "Leadership that's working." Republican platform endorsed continued tax reduction, defense buildup, anti-abortion, school prayer.

Democratic primary 1984 was structural. Mondale faced tough challenges from Sen Gary Hart of Colorado + Rev Jesse Jackson. Hart's "new ideas" campaign won 26 primaries (more than Mondale's 25) but Mondale won delegates through superdelegate framework + structural endorsements. Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" campaign was structurally significant - first major African American presidential candidacy (Shirley Chisholm 1972 had been first African American Democratic presidential candidate but won only 0.04% of national delegates; Jackson 1984 won 18.2% of primary votes + 384 delegates). Jackson's campaign mobilized African American + minority voters at unprecedented scale.

Democratic National Convention met in San Francisco July 16-19, 1984 and nominated Mondale on the first ballot. Mondale was 56, Carter's VP (1977-81), Minnesota Senator (1964-76). He selected Rep Geraldine Ferraro of NY (49, U.S. Rep 1979-85) as VP - first woman on major-party presidential ticket. The Ferraro selection was structurally consequential: it demonstrated Democratic Party's commitment to gender equality + mobilized women voters. Subsequent women on major-party tickets: Palin (Republican VP 2008); Hillary Clinton (Democratic presidential 2016); Harris (Democratic VP 2020; presidential 2024).

Mondale's July 19, 1984 acceptance speech included structural commitment: "Mr. Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I. He won't tell you. I just did." The honesty was politically devastating. Reagan's campaign immediately exploited the tax-increase commitment. Mondale's structural defense (he believed deficit reduction required revenue increases) was politically unsustainable against Reagan's tax-cut message.

Reagan campaign theme "Morning in America." Optimistic television ads showed prosperous suburban families, weddings, paperboys, new houses. "It's morning again in America." Created by Hal Riney + Phil Dusenberry "Tuesday Team" advertising agency. Politically masterful contrast with Carter "malaise." Reagan also used "Bear in the Woods" ad - "There is a bear in the woods. For some people, the bear is easy to see. Others don't see it at all. Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it's vicious and dangerous. Since no one can really be sure who's right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear? If there is a bear." The ad subtly invoked Cold

War concerns without naming Soviet Union directly.

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Reagan won 525 electoral votes to Mondale's 13. Reagan carried 49 states; Mondale carried 1 state (Minnesota, his home state, by 3,761 votes) + DC. The popular vote: Reagan 54,455,472 (58.8%); Mondale 37,577,352 (40.6%); minor candidates ~600,000. Reagan-Mondale popular-vote margin: 16,878,120.

The geographic pattern was structurally extreme. Reagan swept every region: Northeast (except DC), Mid-Atlantic, South, Midwest, Mountain West, West Coast. Minnesota's 3,761-vote Mondale margin was the closest of any state - Mondale's home-state advantage barely held.

Reagan's second term (1985-89) included: (1) October 22, 1986 Tax Reform Act of 1986 - simplified tax code; reduced top rate from 50% to 28%. (2) 1986 Iran-Contra scandal - administration officials sold weapons to Iran (despite arms embargo) and diverted profits to Nicaraguan Contras (despite Boland Amendment). Reagan denied knowledge but evidence suggested he knew. November 1986 Tower Commission report. (3) June 12, 1987 "Tear down this wall" Brandenburg Gate speech: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" (4) December 8, 1987 INF Treaty signed with Gorbachev - eliminated intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe. First U.S.-Soviet arms-reduction treaty (previous treaties had been arms-limitation). (5) 1987 stock market crash October 19 ("Black Monday"; Dow Jones -22.6%). (6) 1988 Reagan-Gorbachev Moscow Summit. (7) January 11, 1989 farewell address.

The 1984 election's structural significance was fourfold. First, Reagan's 49-state landslide confirmed Republican-conservative ascendance that would dominate U.S. politics through 2008. Second, the "Morning in America" campaign template was operationalized through subsequent optimistic incumbent re-elections (Clinton 1996 "Bridge to the 21st Century"; Obama 2012 "Forward"). Third, the Ferraro VP selection began the structural integration of women into major-party tickets. Fourth, Jackson's Rainbow Coalition campaign demonstrated viable African American presidential

		candidacy - the structural precursor to Obama 2008. The Cold War context was structurally critical to 1984. Soviet Union under Brezhnev (1964-82), Andropov (1982-84), Chernenko (1984-85) had been politically stagnant. Gorbachev would not become General Secretary until March 1985. The 1984 Reagan-Mondale debate occurred during Cold War tensions: SDI proposal March 1983; Reagan "evil empire" speech March 1983; KAL 007 September 1983; Soviet boycott of LA Olympics August 1984. Reagan's 1984 victory mandate would shape his 1985-89 second-term Cold War policy.
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 1984 Election

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Key words

Ronald Reagan	40th U.S. president (1981-89). Hollywood actor (1937-65); California Governor (1967-75). Republican candidate 1968 + 1976. Won 1980 with 489-49 EV; 1984 with 525-13 EV - one of biggest landslides in U.S. history (tied Nixon 1972).
Walter Mondale	Carter's VP (1977-81) and 1984 Democratic presidential nominee. Minnesota Senator (1964-76). Lost 525-13 EV. Carried only home state Minnesota + DC.
"Morning in America"	Reagan's 1984 campaign theme. Optimistic television ads showing prosperous suburban families. Created by Hal Riney + Phil Dusenberry "Tuesday Team" advertising agency. Politically masterful contrast with Carter "malaise."
Geraldine Ferraro	1984 Democratic VP nominee. NY Rep (1979-85). Mondale selected her July 12, 1984 - first woman on major-party presidential ticket.

Jesse Jackson Rainbow Coalition 1984 Democratic presidential campaign by Rev Jesse Jackson. First major African American presidential candidacy. Won 18.2% of primary votes + 384 delegates. Mobilized African American + minority voters at unprecedented scale. Structural precursor to Obama 2008.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Reagan win in 1984?

( ) A. 489
( ) B. 506
( ) C. 525
( ) D. 538

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which state did Mondale carry in 1984?

( ) A. Massachusetts
( ) B. Minnesota
( ) C. New York
( ) D. California

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was Reagan's "Morning in America" campaign theme?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Geraldine Ferraro's 1984 VP nomination structurally significant?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

525. Reagan 525; Mondale 13. Reagan carried 49 states. Mondale carried only Minnesota (his home state, by 3,761 votes) + DC. Tied Nixon 1972 for biggest electoral landslide in U.S. history.

AP students should know the 525-13 split.

QUESTION 2

Minnesota. Mondale carried only his home state Minnesota (by 3,761 votes out of ~2M cast) + DC (3 EV). Mondale's home-state advantage barely held - Minnesota was the closest state in the 1984 election.

AP students should know Minnesota as Mondale's only state.

QUESTION 3

"Morning in America" was Reagan's 1984 campaign theme. Optimistic television ads showed prosperous suburban families, weddings, paperboys, new houses, American flags, prosperous Main Street businesses. Background voice-over: "It's morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes... 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning again in America. And under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder, and stronger, and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?" Created by Hal Riney + Phil Dusenberry "Tuesday Team" advertising agency. Politically masterful contrast with Carter "malaise" (July 1979 "crisis of confidence" speech). The "Morning in America" theme became the structural template for subsequent optimistic incumbent re-election campaigns (Clinton 1996 "Bridge to the 21st Century"; Obama 2012 "Forward").

AP students should be able to articulate the theme.

QUESTION 4

Geraldine Ferraro's 1984 VP nomination was structurally significant for four reasons: (1) First woman on major-party presidential ticket in U.S. history. Mondale selected Ferraro July 12, 1984 - 64 years after the 19th Amendment's ratification (August 18, 1920) granting women voting rights. The 64-year gap reflected structural Democratic Party + Republican Party reluctance to nominate women for national tickets. (2) Demonstrated Democratic Party's commitment to gender equality. Mondale's campaign needed to mobilize women voters; Ferraro's selection structurally addressed gender-policy commitments. (3) Mobilized women voters. Ferraro's campaign appearances + media coverage + symbolic representation increased women's political engagement. The "gender gap" - women voting more Democratic than men - had emerged in 1980 (Reagan + 8 points among men but only +1 point among women) and would persist through subsequent elections. (4) Established structural precedent. Subsequent women on major-party tickets: Palin (Republican VP 2008); Hillary Clinton (Democratic presidential 2016); Harris (Democratic VP 2020 + presidential 2024). The 1984 Ferraro nomination was the structural beginning of women's integration into top-of-ticket presidential politics. Limitation: Ferraro's candidacy was structurally damaged by her husband John Zaccaro's tax-fraud controversies + Ferraro's own tax-disclosure issues. The Mondale-Ferraro ticket lost 525-13 EV. But the structural precedent had been established.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance.