1984

Ronald Reagan vs Walter Mondale

A 50-minute lesson on the 1984 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) · 525 EV	RUNNER-UP Walter Mondale (Democratic) · 13 EV
KEY ISSUE Economic recovery; Reagan Revolution; deficit spending; nuclear arms race	TURNOUT 55.2%

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1984: Ronald Reagan vs Walter Mondale

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 structural conditions in 1981-84 America that would produce a Reagan re-election landslide. For each identify the specific 1981-84 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	1984 election was 50th U.S. presidential election. Reagan 525 EV / Mondale 13 EV. One of biggest electoral landslides in U.S. history (tied Nixon 1972). Reagan 58.8% popular vote close to LBJ 1964 (61.1%) + Nixon 1972 (60.7%). Reagan 1981-84 first-term agenda: (1) August 1981 ERTA - 23% across-the-board income tax reduction; top marginal rate 70% ’ 50%. (2) Deregulation expansion. (3) Defense buildup - $158B (1981) ’ $304B (1989). (4) Tight monetary policy under Fed Chair Volcker - broke inflation through 1981-82 recession (prime rate 21.5% Dec 1980; unemployment 10.8% Nov 1982). (5) Domestic spending cuts. (6) Federal regulatory rollback. Reagan 1981-84 events: (1) 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). (2) August 5, 1981 PATCO strike - Reagan fired ~11,345 air traffic controllers who had struck illegally. Politically transformative. (3) October 1981 Reagan colon cancer surgery. (4) 1981-82 recession + 1983-84 recovery (GDP +4.6% 1983, +7.2% 1984 best since 1951; unemployment 10.8% ’ 7.5%; inflation 13.5% ’ 4.3%). (5) March 8, 1983 "Evil Empire" speech. (6) March 23, 1983 SDI speech. (7) September 1, 1983 KAL 007 shot down by Soviet fighter (269 dead). (8) October 23, 1983 Beirut barracks bombing - 241 U.S. Marines killed in suicide truck bombing. Reagan withdrew Marines February 1984. (9) October 25, 1983 Grenada invasion (Urgent Fury). 19 U.S. military deaths. (10) January 1, 1984 AT&T break-up. Republican Convention Dallas August 20-23, 1984 renominated Reagan-Bush. Slogan: "Bringing America back" + "Leadership that's working." Democratic primary 1984 structural. Mondale faced Sen Gary Hart (CO) + Rev Jesse Jackson. Hart won 26 primaries; Mondale 25. Mondale won delegates through superdelegate framework + structural endorsements. Jackson "Rainbow Coalition" campaign first major African American presidential candidacy - 18.2% primary votes

+ 384 delegates. Mobilized African American + minority voters unprecedented scale.

Democratic Convention SF July 16-19, 1984 nominated Mondale first ballot. Mondale 56, Carter's VP, Minnesota Senator. Selected Rep Geraldine Ferraro (NY, 49) VP July 12 - first woman on major-party presidential ticket.

Mondale July 19, 1984 acceptance speech: "Mr. Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I. He won't tell you. I just did." Honesty politically devastating. Reagan campaign exploited the tax-increase commitment.

Reagan campaign theme "Morning in America." Optimistic TV ads. Hal Riney + Phil Dusenberry "Tuesday Team." Politically masterful contrast with Carter "malaise."

Wendy's "Where's the beef?" 1984 TV commercial (Clara Peller) used by Mondale in primary against Hart became cultural shorthand.

October 7, 1984 first debate Louisville politically devastating for Reagan (73) - confused, hesitant, rambling. Press openly questioned Reagan's age affecting ability to serve.

October 21, 1984 second debate Kansas City structurally critical. Henry Trewhitt (Baltimore Sun) asked: "You already are the oldest president in history... Is there any doubt in your mind that you would be able to function in such circumstances?" Reagan: "Not at all, Mr. Trewhitt, and I want you to know that also I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience." Mondale laughed. Line ended age controversy. Mondale later: "When that line came out, I knew the election was over."

Reagan 525 EV; Mondale 13. Reagan 49 states; Mondale 1 (Minnesota, his home state, by 3,761 votes) + DC. Popular vote: Reagan 54,455,472 (58.8%); Mondale 37,577,352 (40.6%); minor ~600K. Margin 16,878,120.

Geographic pattern structurally extreme. Reagan swept every region. Minnesota's 3,761-vote Mondale margin was closest of any state - Mondale's home-state advantage barely held.

Reagan second term 1985-89: (1) October 22, 1986 Tax Reform Act - top rate 50% ’ 28%. (2) 1986 Iran-Contra scandal - administration officials sold weapons to Iran (despite arms embargo) + diverted profits to Nicaraguan Contras (despite Boland Amendment). November 1986 Tower Commission report. (3) June 12, 1987 "Tear down this wall" Brandenburg Gate speech. (4) December 8, 1987 INF Treaty with Gorbachev - eliminated intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe. First U.S.-Soviet arms-reduction treaty. (5) October 19, 1987 "Black Monday" stock crash (Dow -22.6%). (6) January 11, 1989 farewell address.

		1984 election structural significance fourfold: (1) Reagan's 49-state landslide confirmed Republican-conservative ascendance (1968-2008). (2) "Morning in America" template operationalized through subsequent optimistic re-elections (Clinton 1996 "Bridge"; Obama 2012 "Forward"). (3) Ferraro VP began structural integration of women into major-party tickets. (4) Jackson's Rainbow Coalition demonstrated viable African American presidential candidacy - structural precursor to Obama 2008.
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

Ronald Reagan
40th U.S. president (1981-89). Hollywood actor + CA Governor. Won 1980 489-49 EV; 1984 525-13 EV.

"Morning in America"
Reagan's 1984 campaign theme. Optimistic TV ads. Tuesday Team advertising agency.

Jesse Jackson Rainbow Coalition
1984 Democratic presidential campaign. First major African American presidential candidacy. 18.2% primary votes + 384 delegates.

Reaganomics
Reagan's economic-policy framework. Four pillars: tax cuts (1981 ERTA top rate 70%’50%; 1986 Tax Reform Act top rate 50%’28%); deregulation; defense buildup; tight monetary policy under Volcker. Critics called it "voodoo economics" (George H.W. Bush in 1980 primary).

Walter Mondale
Carter's VP (1977-81) and 1984 Democratic nominee. Lost 525-13 EV.

Geraldine Ferraro
1984 Democratic VP nominee. NY Rep (1979-85). First woman on major-party presidential ticket.

PATCO strike
August 1981 strike by Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). Federal employees illegally struck for pay + working conditions. Reagan fired ~11,345 controllers August 5, 1981. Politically transformative; weakened labor movement structurally.

"Morning in America" 1984 Campaign Ad Transcript

REAGAN-BUSH 1984 CAMPAIGN (TUESDAY TEAM), SEPTEMBER 1984

The "Morning in America" advertisement was the structural centerpiece of Reagan's 1984 campaign. Created by the Tuesday Team advertising agency led by Hal Riney + Phil Dusenberry. The 60-second ad aired starting September 1984. The transcript below was the voice-over read by Hal Riney himself. The ad showed optimistic images of prosperous suburban families, weddings, paperboys, new houses, American flags, prosperous Main Street businesses. The visual-rhetorical combination was politically masterful: presented Reagan's 1981-84 first term as restoration of American optimism after Carter's "malaise." The ad is widely cited as one of the most effective political advertisements in U.S. history. The structural lesson: optimistic incumbent campaigning can defeat opponents who challenge the structural narrative even when policy substance is contested.

> *"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, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 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?"*

Reagan-Bush 1984 Campaign, "Prouder, Stronger, Better" (Tuesday Team production, September 1984). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political advertisement, ɗ50 words.

The 1984 Election

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

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

The "Morning in America" ad says "with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future." What is the rhetorical purpose of this passage?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1984 election map, identify Reagan's 49 states and Mondale's 1 state (Minnesota) + DC. What does the geographic pattern reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

525. Reagan 525; Mondale 13.

AP students should know the 525-13 split.

QUESTION 2

Minnesota.

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

QUESTION 3

"Morning in America" was Reagan's 1984 campaign theme. Optimistic TV ads showing prosperous suburban families, weddings, paperboys, new houses. "It's morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history... 6,500 young men and women will be married... It's morning again in America. 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."

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

The "Morning in America" passage on inflation uses three rhetorical strategies: (1) Quantitative comparison. "Less than half of what it was just four years ago" provides specific factual contrast (Carter-era inflation 13.5% in 1980 vs Reagan-era 4.3% in 1984). The factual specificity makes the claim politically credible. (2) Personal-future framing. "They can look forward with confidence to the future" connects economic recovery to individual aspirations (young couples getting married). (3) Implicit Carter contrast. "Where we were less than four short years ago" recalls Carter-era stagflation without naming Carter directly. The passage transforms a structural economic indicator (inflation) into a personal-future emotional appeal. Subsequent presidential campaigns would adopt similar rhetorical strategies: connect quantitative achievements to personal emotional narratives + implicit contrast with predecessor. The structural lesson: effective political advertising translates abstract policy outcomes into concrete personal-future framings.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 5

Ferraro's 1984 VP nomination was structurally significant for four reasons: (1) First woman on major-party presidential ticket - 64 years after 19th Amendment. (2) Demonstrated Democratic Party commitment to gender equality - structural addressing of gender-policy commitments. (3) Mobilized women voters - "gender gap" structural emergence (women voting more Democratic than men). (4) Established structural precedent for 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 structural beginning of women's integration into top-of-ticket presidential politics.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

Reagan states (49): everything except Minnesota. Mondale states (1 + DC): Minnesota (10 EV; Mondale's home state, won by 3,761 votes) + DC (3 EV) = 13 EV. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Reagan coalition geographically comprehensive - swept Northeast + South + Midwest + Mountain West + West Coast. (2) Minnesota was Mondale's home state - structural home-state advantage barely held (3,761-vote margin out of ~2M cast). Without home-state advantage Mondale might have carried 0 states. (3) The 1984 map matched Nixon 1972 (49 states; Massachusetts only Democratic state in 1972 vs Minnesota only Democratic state in 1984). (4) The 1984 landslide structurally confirmed Reagan coalition: Southern realignment + Mountain West + suburban-Northeast + working-class whites + religious conservatives. (5) Republican-conservative ascendance (1968-2008) had reached structural peak.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural pattern.