1984

Ronald Reagan vs Walter Mondale

A 75-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%

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

1984: Ronald Reagan vs Walter Mondale

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 1984 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1984 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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 (tied Nixon 1972). Reagan 58.8% popular vote close to LBJ 1964 + Nixon 1972. Reagan 1981-84 agenda: ERTA 1981 (23% income tax cut; top rate 70%’50%); deregulation; defense buildup ($158B’$304B); Volcker tight monetary policy broke inflation through 1981-82 recession; domestic spending cuts; federal regulatory rollback. Reagan 1981-84 events: March 30, 1981 Hinckley assassination attempt; August 5, 1981 PATCO firing (11,345 controllers); October 1981 colon cancer surgery; 1981-82 recession; 1983-84 recovery (GDP +7.2% 1984 best since 1951; unemployment 10.8%’7.5%; inflation 13.5%’4.3%); March 1983 "Evil Empire" + SDI speeches; September 1983 KAL 007; October 1983 Beirut barracks bombing (241 Marines killed) + Grenada invasion; January 1984 AT&T break-up. Republican Convention Dallas August 1984 renominated Reagan-Bush. Slogan "Leadership that's working." Democratic primary 1984: Mondale defeated Hart + Jackson. Hart won 26 primaries; Mondale 25. Mondale won via superdelegate framework. Jackson Rainbow Coalition first major African American presidential candidacy (18.2% primary votes; 384 delegates). Democratic Convention SF July 16-19, 1984 nominated Mondale. Ferraro VP - first woman on major-party presidential ticket.

Mondale July 19, 1984: "Mr. Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I. He won't tell you. I just did." Politically devastating.

Reagan campaign theme "Morning in America." Tuesday Team advertising agency.

October 7, 1984 first debate politically devastating for Reagan (73). October 21, 1984 second debate "I will not make age an issue" line ended age controversy.

Reagan 525 EV / Mondale 13. Reagan 49 states; Mondale Minnesota + DC. Popular vote: Reagan 58.8%; Mondale 40.6%. Margin 16,878,120.

Reagan second term 1985-89: October 1986 Tax Reform Act (top rate 50%'28%); 1986 Iran-Contra scandal; June 1987 "Tear down this wall" Brandenburg Gate; December 1987 INF Treaty with Gorbachev; October 1987 Black Monday; January 1989 farewell address.

1984 election structural significance: (1) Confirmed Republican-conservative ascendance 1968-2008. (2) "Morning in America" template for subsequent optimistic re-elections. (3) Ferraro VP began women's integration into major-party tickets. (4) Jackson Rainbow Coalition structural precursor to Obama 2008.

The 1984 election can be analyzed retrospectively as the structural peak of the Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance. Reagan's 49-state landslide demonstrated coalition strength. The 1988 Bush 426-111 EV victory over Dukakis would extend the era. The 1992 Bush loss to Clinton would be the structural interruption produced by the 1990-91 recession + Ross Perot third-party challenge. Reagan-era Republican governance (1981-93) would shape U.S. politics through 2008.

The 1984 election's long-term structural significance for the Democratic Party: Mondale 1984 defeat (525-13 EV; 40.6% popular vote) was one of the worst Democratic presidential performances in U.S. history. Combined with McGovern 1972 (520-17 EV; 37.5%) and Dukakis 1988 (426-111 EV; 45.6%), the 1972-88 sequence demonstrated structural Democratic difficulty competing at presidential level. The "Democratic Party can't win" narrative would shape party strategy through Clinton 1992: emphasize moderate Southern Democrats; reject McGovernite-Mondale liberalism; embrace DLC centrism; cultivate suburban-white-voter outreach.

The 1984 election's rhetorical-cultural legacy: "Morning in America" became cultural shorthand for optimistic political appeal. The Tuesday Team advertising approach (emotional storytelling + visual aesthetics + minimal policy specifics) became the template for subsequent presidential campaign advertising. The "Reagan Democrats" demographic (working-class whites who had voted Democrat in 1976 but voted Reagan in 1980/1984) became a structural focus for both parties' campaign

		strategies. 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 1984 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

Ronald Reagan
40th U.S. president (1981-89).

"Morning in America"
Reagan's 1984 campaign theme.

Jesse Jackson Rainbow Coalition
1984 Democratic presidential campaign. First major African American presidential candidacy.

Reaganomics
Tax cuts + deregulation + defense buildup + tight monetary policy.

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

Geraldine Ferraro
1984 Democratic VP nominee. First woman on major-party presidential ticket.

PATCO strike
August 1981 strike. Reagan fired ~11,345 controllers August 5, 1981.

"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 visual-rhetorical combination was politically masterful: presented Reagan's 1981-84 first term as restoration of American optimism after Carter's "malaise."

> *"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 speech, ≈150 words.

The 1984 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 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?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the 1984 Reagan landslide was the structural peak of Republican-conservative ascendance 1968-2008.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

QUESTION 3

"Morning in America" Reagan's 1984 campaign theme. Optimistic TV ads. Tuesday Team agency. Contrast with Carter "malaise."

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Rhetorical strategies: quantitative comparison (less than half); personal-future framing (couples marrying); implicit Carter contrast (four short years ago). Transforms structural economic indicator into personal-future emotional appeal.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 5

First woman on major-party presidential ticket - 64 years after 19th Amendment. Demonstrated Democratic Party commitment to gender equality. Mobilized women voters - "gender gap" emergence. Established structural precedent for subsequent women on major-party tickets (Palin 2008; Hillary Clinton 2016; Harris 2020/2024).

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

The 1984 Reagan landslide was the structural peak of Republican-conservative ascendance 1968-2008 for five reasons: (1) Coalition consolidation. Reagan's 49-state landslide demonstrated that the Republican coalition - Southern realignment + Mountain West + suburban-Northeast + working-class whites + religious conservatives - was structurally larger than any competing Democratic coalition. The coalition had emerged from Goldwater 1964 + Nixon 1968 + Nixon 1972 + Reagan 1980 + Reagan 1984. (2) Ideological dominance. Reagan's 1981-84 conservative agenda - tax cuts + deregulation + defense buildup + tight monetary policy - had operationalized Goldwater's 1964 framework. The 1984 voter mandate confirmed conservative ideological viability. (3) Demographic strength. Reagan won every demographic group except African Americans (LBJ-era loyalty) and Jewish voters (cultural-liberal voting): suburban whites, Catholic immigrants (Catholic Reagan Democrats), evangelical Protestants, Southern whites, working-class whites, suburban professionals, business owners. The cumulative coalition was structurally dominant. (4) Subsequent electoral confirmation. Bush 1988 (426-111 EV) extended the era. Even Bush 1992 loss to Clinton was structurally produced by Perot third-party challenge + 1990-91 recession - not Republican coalitional weakness. Bush 2000 + 2004 victories continued the framework. (5) End in 2008. The structural ascendance ended only with Obama 2008 - and even Obama's victory required structural conditions (2008 financial crisis; Iraq War unpopularity; McCain campaign weaknesses). The 1984 landslide was the peak.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural peak.

QUESTION 7

Reagan states (49): everything except Minnesota. Mondale states (1 + DC): Minnesota (Mondale's home state, by 3,761 votes) + DC. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Reagan coalition geographically comprehensive. (2) Minnesota Mondale home-state advantage barely held. (3) 1984 map matched Nixon 1972 (49 states each). (4) Republican-conservative ascendance had reached structural peak.

AP students should be able to articulate.

Discussion prompts

1. Reagan's 1984 49-state landslide tied Nixon 1972. Identify three structural reasons Reagan's 1984 re-election margin was so large despite his low first-term approval ratings (1982 unemployment peak; Beirut barracks bombing).

2. Ferraro's 1984 VP nomination was first woman on major-party presidential ticket. Identify three structural reasons women's integration into top-of-ticket presidential politics took until 1984 to begin.