AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1984

Ronald Reagan vs Walter Mondale

A 105-minute lesson on the 1984 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) · 525 EV	RUNNER-UP Walter Mondale (Democratic) · 13 EV
KEY ISSUE Economic recovery; Reagan Revolution; deficit spending; nuclear arms race	TURNOUT 55.2%

CONTENTS

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3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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1984: Ronald Reagan vs Walter Mondale

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 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. Reagan 1981-84 agenda: ERTA 1981 (income tax cuts; top rate 70%'50%); deregulation; defense buildup ($158B'$304B); Volcker tight monetary policy; domestic spending cuts; federal regulatory rollback. Reagan 1981-84 events: March 30, 1981 Hinckley assassination attempt; August 5, 1981 PATCO firing; October 1981 colon cancer surgery; 1981-82 recession (unemployment 10.8% peak); 1983-84 recovery (GDP +7.2% 1984; unemployment 7.5%; inflation 4.3%); March 1983 "Evil Empire" + SDI; September 1983 KAL 007; October 1983 Beirut barracks + Grenada; January 1984 AT&T break-up. Republican Convention Dallas August 1984 renominated Reagan-Bush. Democratic primary 1984: Mondale defeated Hart + Jackson. Jackson Rainbow Coalition first major African American presidential candidacy. Democratic Convention SF July 16-19, 1984 nominated Mondale. Ferraro VP - first woman on major-party presidential ticket. Mondale "Mr. Reagan will raise taxes, and so will I." Politically devastating. Reagan "Morning in America." Tuesday Team agency. 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: Reagan 58.8%; Mondale 40.6%.

Reagan second term 1985-89: October 1986 Tax Reform Act; 1986 Iran-Contra scandal; June 1987 "Tear down this wall"; December 1987 INF Treaty; October 1987 Black Monday; January 1989 farewell.

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

The 1984 election was structural peak of Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance. The 1988 Bush 426-111 EV victory would extend era. 1992 Bush loss to Clinton was structural interruption produced by 1990-91 recession + Perot third-party challenge. Reagan-era governance (1981-93) shaped 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 worst Democratic presidential performances. 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 at presidential level. "Democratic Party can't win" narrative shaped party strategy through Clinton 1992: emphasize moderate Southern Democrats; reject McGovernite-Mondale liberalism; embrace DLC centrism; cultivate suburban-white-voter outreach.

The Reagan-era political-economic transformation 1981-89 structurally important: (1) Tax policy - federal income tax rates reduced from 70% top marginal rate (1980) to 28% (1986 Tax Reform Act). The structural reduction shaped U.S. fiscal politics through 2017 Trump Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. (2) Deregulation - financial services, telecommunications, broadcasting, environmental, labor. Structural transformation of U.S. regulatory state. (3) Federal debt growth - tax cuts + defense buildup + recession reduced revenues produced large deficits. Federal debt rose from $0.9T (1980) to $2.7T (1988) - 200% increase. (4) Labor weakening - PATCO firing 1981 + structural anti-union policies + economic shifts (manufacturing decline) reduced labor union density from 24.1% (1979) to 16.8% (1989). (5) Wealth inequality acceleration - tax cuts + capital-gains favorability + financialization produced structural wealth concentration. The top 1% wealth share rose from ~25% (1979) to ~30% (1989) and would continue rising through subsequent decades. (6) Cold War transformation - Reagan defense buildup + SDI proposal + INF Treaty + Gorbachev cooperation produced the structural conditions for Cold War end (Berlin Wall fell November 9, 1989; Soviet Union dissolved December 25, 1991). (7) Cultural conservative ascendance - religious right mobilization + Moral Majority 1979-89 + Christian Coalition 1989+ + Robert Bork SCOTUS nomination 1987 (rejected) + Antonin Scalia confirmation 1986 produced structural conservative cultural influence.

The 1984 election can be analyzed retrospectively as the moment when the Republican-conservative coalition that Goldwater 1964 had inaugurated reached structural

		peak. Subsequent Republican victories (Bush 1988; Bush 2000; Bush 2004; Trump 2016; Trump 2024) would operate within the structural framework Reagan had established. The 1984 mandate was the foundation.
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

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

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

Jesse Jackson Rainbow Coalition
1984 Democratic presidential campaign.

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

Iran-Contra scandal
1986-87 scandal. Administration officials sold weapons to Iran (despite arms embargo) and diverted profits to Nicaraguan Contras (despite Boland Amendment). Reagan denied direct knowledge; Tower Commission report November 1986.

Walter Mondale
Carter's VP and 1984 Democratic nominee.

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

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

1986 Tax Reform Act
October 22, 1986 federal law simplifying tax code; reduced top marginal rate from 50% to 28%.

"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.

> *"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.

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

"Morning in America" 1984 Campaign Ad Transcript

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

"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.

SOURCE B

Second Reagan-Mondale Debate (Age Joke)

RONALD REAGAN, OCTOBER 21, 1984

"TREWHITT: Mr. President, I want to raise an issue that I think has been lurking out there for two or three weeks, and cast it specifically in national security terms. You already are the oldest president in history, and some of your staff say you were tired after your most recent encounter with Mr. Mondale. I recall, yes, that President Kennedy had to go for days on end with very little sleep during the Cuban missile crisis. 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. If I still have time, I might add, Mr. Trewhitt, I might add that it was Seneca or it was Cicero, I don't know which, that said: "If it was not for the elders correcting the mistakes of the young, there would be no state.""

Reagan, "Second Reagan-Mondale Debate" (Kansas City, October 21, 1984). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political debate, ≤150 words.

The 1984 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 ("Morning in America" ad) articulating optimistic incumbent campaign rhetoric. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Reagan age joke) defusing the structural age controversy. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources are from the same 1984 Reagan campaign but use different rhetorical strategies. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Reagan's "I am not going to exploit my opponent's youth and inexperience" line is widely cited as one of the most effective in U.S. debate history. Identify the specific rhetorical strategies.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific 1984-2008 developments that demonstrate the 1984 Reagan landslide was the structural peak of Republican-conservative ascendance.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How old was Reagan at his second inauguration?

( ) A. 69
( ) B. 73
( ) C. 75
( ) D. 77

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

On what date was the second Reagan-Mondale debate?

( ) A. October 7, 1984
( ) B. October 14, 1984
( ) C. October 21, 1984
( ) D. October 28, 1984

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1984 election about Republican-conservative-peak, campaign-template, or women-integration? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

The "Morning in America" 1984 campaign ad (Source A) articulated Reagan's optimistic incumbent campaign framework. The October 1984 age-joke debate exchange (Source B) defused the structural age controversy through humor. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1964-2024 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1984 election represented (a) the structural peak of Republican-conservative ascendance 1968-2008, (b) the foundation for the modern presidential campaign template, or (c) the beginning of women's integration into top-of-ticket presidential politics. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the Republican-peak-vs-campaign-template-vs-women-integration axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Goldwater 1964 campaign, the Nixon 1972 landslide, the Reagan 1980 election, the Iran-Contra scandal, the Bush 1988 victory, the Clinton 1992 victory, the Obama 2008 victory, the Hillary Clinton 2016 candidacy. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "It's morning again in America", "Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history", "with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future", "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?". The "It's morning again in America" phrase is the most distinctive.

The ad's framing established optimistic incumbent rhetoric.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "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", "If it was not for the elders correcting the mistakes of the young, there would be no state". The "I am not going to exploit, for political purposes, my opponent's youth and inexperience" phrase is the most distinctive.

Reagan's framing defused the age controversy through humor.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Reagan's 1984 paid television advertising - articulated through Tuesday Team to mass audiences to mobilize voter support. The function is to establish Reagan as candidate of optimistic national renewal. Source B is Reagan's 1984 debate response - articulated in real-time during nationally televised debate to defuse the structural age controversy through humor. The function is to neutralize the structurally devastating "Reagan is too old" framing that the October 7 first debate had reinforced. Together, the sources reveal the 1984 Reagan campaign's rhetorical sophistication: paid advertising created the optimistic structural narrative; debate performance defended Reagan against tactical challenges to that narrative. Both worked because Reagan's persona was credible: he genuinely projected optimism + good humor. The structural lesson: campaign rhetoric must align with candidate persona to be politically effective.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural relationship.

QUESTION 4

Reagan's "I am not going to exploit my opponent's youth and inexperience" uses five rhetorical strategies: (1) Comic role-reversal. Reagan turned the age question (a structural weakness for him) into a strength by jokingly accusing Mondale (56, younger) of being inexperienced. The reversal forced Mondale to laugh + accept the framing. (2) Pre-emptive defensiveness reversal. Reagan announced he "will not make age an issue" - then immediately made age an issue but in the opposite direction. The maneuver was politically masterful. (3) Audience-laughter validation. The debate audience laughed audibly. Mondale himself smiled and laughed (visible on television). The audience reaction provided structural validation that Reagan had defused the issue. (4) Classical-philosophical citation. Reagan added "it was Seneca or it was Cicero, I don't know which, that said: 'If it was not for the elders correcting the mistakes of the young, there would be no state.'" The classical citation reinforced Reagan's argument that age = wisdom rather than incapacity. (5) Self-deprecating humor without self-deprecation. Reagan turned an attack on his age into a joke that didn't require him to acknowledge any age-related weakness. The structural masterstroke: he eliminated the age question without admitting any vulnerability. Mondale later said: "When that line came out, I knew the election was over." The structural lesson: humor can structurally neutralize policy attacks when used by a credible candidate.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategies.

QUESTION 5

Three specific 1984-2008 developments demonstrating 1984 Reagan landslide as structural peak: (1) Republican victories continued. Bush 1988 (426-111 EV; 53.4% popular vote over Dukakis); Bush 2000 (271-266 EV over Gore in disputed result; 47.9% popular vote); Bush 2004 (286-251 EV over Kerry; 50.7% popular vote). 5 of 8 elections 1980-2008 produced Republican presidents. (2) Conservative ideological dominance. Reagan-era tax-cutting framework operationalized through subsequent legislation: 1990 Bush "no new taxes" reversal (politically devastating); 2001 + 2003 Bush tax cuts; 2017 Trump Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. Reagan-era deregulation operationalized through Clinton-era welfare reform (1996), telecommunications deregulation (1996), Glass-Steagall repeal (1999). Conservative judicial appointments (Scalia 1986; Thomas 1991; Roberts 2005; Alito 2006) shaped Supreme Court 1986-2024. (3) Coalition demographic consistency. The Reagan coalition - Southern realignment + Mountain West + suburban-Northeast + working-class whites + religious conservatives - remained structurally intact through 2008. Bush 2004 won the same demographic groups Reagan 1984 had won. (4) Democratic adaptation rather than reversal. Clinton 1992 + 1996 + Obama 2008 + 2012 represented Democratic adaptation to Reagan-era framework rather than structural reversal. Clinton signed welfare reform; Obama maintained Bush-era tax cuts; both maintained Reagan-era foreign-policy framework. (5) Structural end with Obama 2008. The Republican-conservative ascendance ended only with the 2008 financial crisis + Obama victory + post-2008 demographic shifts (younger voters; college-educated suburban voters; minority voters). Even then, the framework partially persists through Trump 2016 + 2024 victories. The 1984 landslide was the structural peak from which the ascendance gradually declined through 2008 but did not fully reverse.

AP students should be able to articulate multiple developments.

QUESTION 6

73. Reagan was 73 years old at his second inauguration January 20, 1985 (born February 6, 1911; would turn 74 two weeks later). At the 1984 election (November 6, 1984), Reagan was 73 years 9 months old. He was the oldest U.S. president to that point. Reagan would be 77 years old at the end of his second term January 20, 1989. Subsequent older inaugurations: Biden 78 years old at January 20, 2021 inauguration; Trump 78 years old at January 20, 2025 inauguration.

AP students should know Reagan's 73-year age.

QUESTION 7

October 21, 1984. The second Reagan-Mondale debate was held at the Kansas City Music Hall on October 21, 1984. The first debate had been October 7, 1984 in Louisville. The second debate was the site of Reagan's famous "I will not make age an issue" line.

AP students should know the October 21, 1984 date.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the Republican-conservative-peak-vs-campaign-template-vs-women-integration axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory.