3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

# 1988

## *George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis*

A 35-minute lesson on the 1988 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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| ERA<br>Cold War Realignment | ELECTORAL VOTES<br>538 total |
| WINNER<br>George H. W. Bush (Republican) · 426 EV | RUNNER-UP<br>Michael Dukakis (Democratic) · 111 EV |
| KEY ISSUE<br>Reagan legacy; crime (Willie Horton ad); defense; taxes ('Read my lips') | TURNOUT<br>52.8% |

CONTENTS


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

# 1988: George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis

## Timing

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| 5 min | Warm-up | When an incumbent vice president seeks the presidency to continue his predecessor's policies, what political conditions help or hurt his campaign? |
| 15 min | Reading | 1988 election was 51st U.S. presidential election. Produced George H.W. Bush's 426-111 EV victory over Democrat Michael Dukakis. Bush's 53.4% popular vote established him as 41st U.S. president. Election structurally shaped by Reagan-era continuity + Lee Atwater/Roger Ailes negative campaign + Dukakis structural weakness + "Read my lips" tax promise.<br><br>Reagan could not run in 1988 (22nd Amendment two-term limit). His VP George H.W. Bush was likely Republican nominee. Bush was 64, son of CT Senator Prescott Bush, Yale 1948 (Skull and Bones), WWII Navy fighter pilot (shot down September 2, 1944 over Pacific), Texas oil executive (Zapata Petroleum 1953-66), U.S. Rep from TX (1967-71), Ambassador to UN (1971-73), Republican National Committee Chair (1973-74), envoy to PRC (1974-75), CIA Director (1976-77), 1980 Republican presidential candidate (lost to Reagan in primary - had called Reagan's supply-side economics "voodoo economics"), Reagan's VP (1981-89). Bush's career was the most diverse of any U.S. presidential candidate.<br><br>Republican primary 1988. Bush faced Sen Bob Dole (KS Senate Majority Leader; competed structurally for moderate Republicans); Rep Jack Kemp (NY conservative; advocated supply-side economics + enterprise zones); Pat Robertson (TV evangelist; mobilized religious right); former Delaware Governor Pete du Pont. Bush won March 8, 1988 Super Tuesday (17 mostly Southern primaries; structurally consolidated nomination). Bush won 39 of 41 primaries.<br><br>Republican National Convention met in New Orleans August 15-18, 1988. Bush selected Sen Dan Quayle of Indiana (41) as VP - controversial pick. Quayle was inexperienced + had received Indiana National Guard service avoiding Vietnam draft. The selection was politically risky but reflected Bush's assessment that Quayle would energize younger voters + provide ideological balance.<br><br>Bush's August 18, 1988 acceptance speech is widely cited as one of the most politically effective in U.S. history. The "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge (speechwriter Peggy Noonan) was masterful conservative pledge. The "thousand points of light" passage articulated Bush's vision of civic-society volunteerism: "From it has come the great phrase that I will quote to you for inspiration: 'a thousand points of light.' |

I have spoken of a thousand points of light, of all the community organizations that are spread like stars throughout the Nation, doing good." The speech transformed Bush's image from passive Reagan VP to active conservative leader.

Democratic primary 1988 was wide-open "Seven Dwarfs" race. Gary Hart had been expected 1988 frontrunner but withdrew May 1987 after Donna Rice scandal (Miami Herald story about Hart's extramarital relationship). Hart briefly re-entered race December 1987 but withdrew permanently. The remaining "Seven Dwarfs": Sen Joe Biden (DE) - withdrew September 1987 over plagiarism + speech-borrowing accusations (Biden had quoted British Labour leader Neil Kinnock without attribution); Rep Dick Gephardt (MO) - economic populist; Sen Al Gore Jr (TN) - Southern moderate; Rev Jesse Jackson - African American civil rights leader (1984 Rainbow Coalition); Sen Paul Simon (IL) - liberal pragmatist; former Governor Bruce Babbitt (AZ); Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis.

Dukakis won the Democratic nomination through strategic primary planning. Dukakis was 54, Greek American technocrat, governor of Massachusetts (1975-79, 1983-91). His "Massachusetts Miracle" framing (Massachusetts economy had grown faster than national average 1983-88) was politically distinctive. Dukakis won 18 primaries; Jackson won 11. Dukakis won 1,792 delegates; Jackson 1,023.

Democratic National Convention met in Atlanta July 18-21, 1988 and nominated Dukakis on the first ballot. Sen Lloyd Bentsen of Texas (Senator since 1971; structurally moderate Southern Democrat) was VP - balanced ticket regionally (MA-TX) + ideologically (liberal-moderate). The Bentsen pick attempted to compete for Texas + Southern electoral votes.

Dukakis's July 21, 1988 acceptance speech: "This election is not about ideology, it's about competence." Politically devastating - the framing positioned Dukakis as soulless technocrat. Bush exploited the framing throughout the fall campaign.

The campaign was structural Republican negative advertising masterpiece. Bush campaign manager Lee Atwater (later Republican National Committee Chair 1989-91) + media strategist Roger Ailes (later Fox News founder 1996) ran sophisticated negative campaign. Famous attacks: (1) September 21, 1988 Willie Horton ad - independent expenditure by National Security Political Action Committee (NSPAC, Larry McCarthy producer). Featured Willie Horton, African American convict who had committed rape + assault while on Massachusetts weekend furlough program under Dukakis. Ad framed Dukakis as soft on crime with racial undertones. Atwater reportedly said: "By the time we're finished, they're going to wonder whether Willie Horton is Dukakis's running mate." (2) October 5, 1988 "Revolving Door" ad by Bush campaign - showed prisoners walking through a revolving door as turnstile clicked. Reinforced Willie Horton framing. (3) September 1988 "Boston Harbor" ad attacked Dukakis on environmental record (Massachusetts had polluted Boston Harbor). (4) "Tank ad" using video of Dukakis riding M1 Abrams tank wearing oversized helmet

at Sterling Heights Michigan plant September 13, 1988. The image made Dukakis appear foolish + amateurish.

October 5, 1988 VP debate Omaha between Quayle + Bentsen. Quayle compared himself to JFK in terms of congressional experience. Bentsen response: "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." Politically devastating for Quayle. But did not change election outcome.

October 13, 1988 second presidential debate. Moderator Bernard Shaw (CNN): "Governor, if Kitty Dukakis were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?" Dukakis: "No, I don't, Bernard. And I think you know that I've opposed the death penalty during all of my life. I don't see any evidence that it's a deterrent, and I think there are better and more effective ways to deal with violent crime. We've done so in my own state. And it's one of the reasons why we have had the biggest drop in crime of any industrial state in America, why we have the lowest murder rate of any industrial state in America." Dukakis's emotionless policy-focused response was politically devastating. Voters wanted personal outrage about a hypothetical rape/murder of his wife; Dukakis's technocratic response confirmed the "soulless technocrat" framing. Dukakis later admitted the response was a political mistake.

Bush won 426 electoral votes to Dukakis's 111. Bush carried 40 states; Dukakis 10 states + DC. The popular vote: Bush 48,886,597 (53.4%); Dukakis 41,809,476 (45.6%); minor candidates ~900,000. Bush-Dukakis popular-vote margin: 7,077,121.

The geographic pattern: Bush's 40 states included all of the South + all Mountain West + most Midwest + much of Northeast (New York, New Jersey, Connecticut went Dukakis - structural blue-state pattern emerging) + Pacific (California went Bush; structurally last Republican California victory until... never; Bush 1988 was last Republican California victory). Dukakis's 10 states + DC: Massachusetts (home), New York, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, West Virginia, Rhode Island + DC. The 1988 map structurally previewed the post-1992 Democratic coalition: Northeast + West Coast + selected Midwest industrial.

Bush was inaugurated January 20, 1989. He governed as a moderate establishment Republican. Major achievements: (1) Late 1989 Cold War end - Berlin Wall fell November 9, 1989; Eastern European Communist regimes collapsed 1989-90; German reunification October 3, 1990; Soviet Union dissolved December 25, 1991. Bush's structural management was politically masterful (refused to "dance on the wall" rhetoric that could provoke Soviet hardliners). (2) Persian Gulf War January 16 - February 28, 1991 (Operation Desert Storm) - 34-nation coalition liberated Kuwait from Iraqi August 1990 invasion. ~292 American military deaths. Bush approval reached 89% after war - highest since Truman after Pearl Harbor. (3) Americans with Disabilities Act July 26, 1990. (4) Clean Air Act amendments November 1990. (5)

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| | | Civil Rights Act of 1991 November 21, 1991 (overrode 1989 Wards Cove Supreme Court restriction). (6) North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiated 1991-92 (signed by Bush December 17, 1992; ratified under Clinton 1993).<br><br>But Bush's November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act raised top income tax rate from 28% to 31% as part of deficit-reduction budget deal with Democratic Congress. The tax increase violated his "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge. Politically devastating for 1992 re-election. Conservative Republicans + Ross Perot 1992 third-party challenge would damage Bush.<br><br>1990-91 recession + slow recovery damaged Bush politically. By 1992, his approval had fallen from 89% (March 1991 post-Gulf War) to 29% (July 1992). Bush's 1992 loss to Clinton (370-168 EV) ended his presidency.<br><br>1988 election's structural significance was threefold. First, it extended Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance into Bush 1989-93 third Reagan-era term. Second, the Bush 1988 negative campaign (Lee Atwater + Roger Ailes) became the structural template for subsequent Republican negative advertising. Third, Dukakis's structural defeat reinforced the "Democratic Party can't win" narrative that shaped Clinton 1992 DLC centrism strategy. |
| **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 1988 Election

1988 election was 51st U.S. presidential election. Produced George H.W. Bush's 426-111 EV victory over Democrat Michael Dukakis. Bush's 53.4% popular vote established him as 41st U.S. president. Election structurally shaped by Reagan-era continuity + Lee Atwater/Roger Ailes negative campaign + Dukakis structural weakness + "Read my lips" tax promise.

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## Key words

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| **George H.W. Bush** | 41st U.S. president (1989-93). Reagan's VP (1981-89). Won 1988 with 426-111 EV over Dukakis. Lost 1992 to Clinton 370-168 EV. |
| **Michael Dukakis** | 1988 Democratic presidential nominee. Massachusetts Governor (1975-79, 1983-91). Greek American technocrat. "Massachusetts Miracle" framing. Lost 426-111 EV. |
| **"Read my lips: no new taxes"** | Bush's famous 1988 acceptance speech line. Operationally violated November 5, 1990 with Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. |
| **Willie Horton ad** | September 21, 1988 independent expenditure ad by National Security Political Action Committee. Featured African American convict Willie Horton who committed rape + assault while on Massachusetts weekend furlough. Politically devastating with racial undertones. |
| **Dan Quayle** | Indiana Senator and 1988 Republican VP nominee. 41 at selection. Controversial pick - inexperienced + Indiana National Guard service avoided Vietnam draft. Bentsen "You're no Jack Kennedy" debate moment October 5, 1988. Bush's VP 1989-93. |

# Four questions

**QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How many electoral votes did George H.W. Bush win in 1988?

( ) A. 400
( ) B. 413
( ) C. 426
( ) D. 447

**QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

Who was the 1988 Democratic VP nominee?

( ) A. Lloyd Bentsen
( ) B. Bill Bradley
( ) C. Sam Nunn
( ) D. Mario Cuomo

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

What was Bush's "Read my lips" promise?

**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

What was the Willie Horton ad?

# Answer key

## QUESTION 1

426. Bush 426; Dukakis 111. Bush carried 40 states; Dukakis 10 + DC. Popular vote: Bush 53.4% vs Dukakis 45.6%.

AP students should know the 426-111 split.

## QUESTION 2

Lloyd Bentsen. Texas Senator (1971-93). Selected by Dukakis as VP - balanced ticket regionally (MA-TX) + ideologically (liberal-moderate). Famous debate moment October 5, 1988 in Omaha: Quayle compared his congressional experience to JFK's; Bentsen responded "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." Politically devastating for Quayle but did not change election outcome. Bentsen later served as Clinton's Treasury Secretary 1993-94.

AP students should know Bentsen as 1988 Democratic VP nominee.

## QUESTION 3

Bush's "Read my lips: no new taxes" was his famous Republican Convention acceptance speech line in New Orleans August 18, 1988. Speechwriter Peggy Noonan. "And the Congress will push me to raise taxes and I'll say no. And they'll push, and I'll say no, and they'll push again, and I'll say to them, read my lips: no new taxes." Politically masterful conservative pledge. Operationally violated November 5, 1990 with Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (raised top income tax rate from 28% to 31% as part of deficit-reduction budget deal with Democratic Congress). Politically devastating for 1992 re-election - Democrats used "Read my lips: I lied" frame. Conservative Republicans + Ross Perot third-party challenge damaged Bush.

AP students should know the "Read my lips" promise.

## QUESTION 4

The Willie Horton ad was a September 21, 1988 independent expenditure television advertisement by National Security Political Action Committee. Featured Willie Horton, African American convict serving life sentence in Massachusetts for first-degree murder who had committed 1986 rape + assault while on Massachusetts weekend furlough program under Dukakis. Ad framed Dukakis as soft on crime with strong racial undertones. Lee Atwater (Bush campaign manager) reportedly said: "By the time we're finished, they're going to wonder whether Willie Horton is Dukakis's running mate." Bush campaign's October 5, 1988 "Revolving Door" ad reinforced the framing without showing Horton specifically. Politically devastating + structurally controversial. Widely cited as racially coded campaign advertising. Subsequent Republican strategy was associated with the Willie Horton model. The ad became cultural shorthand for racially coded political advertising.

AP students should know the Willie Horton ad.