1988

George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis

A 50-minute lesson on the 1988 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 George H. W. Bush (Republican) · 426 EV	RUNNER-UP Michael Dukakis (Democratic) · 111 EV
KEY ISSUE Reagan legacy; crime (Willie Horton ad); defense; taxes ('Read my lips')	TURNOUT 52.8%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1988: George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis

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 1981-88 America that would produce a Bush 1988 victory. For each identify the specific Reagan-era development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	1988 election was 51st U.S. presidential election. Bush 426 EV / Dukakis 111 EV. Bush 53.4% popular vote. Election structurally shaped by Reagan-era continuity + Lee Atwater/Roger Ailes negative campaign + Dukakis structural weakness + "Read my lips" tax promise. Reagan could not run 1988 (22A two-term limit). His VP George H.W. Bush was likely Republican nominee. Bush 64, CT Sen Prescott Bush's son, Yale 1948 (Skull and Bones), WWII Navy fighter pilot (shot down September 2, 1944 over Pacific), Texas oil executive, U.S. Rep TX (1967-71), Ambassador to UN (1971-73), RNC Chair (1973-74), envoy to PRC (1974-75), CIA Director (1976-77), 1980 Republican presidential candidate (lost to Reagan; called Reagan's supply-side "voodoo economics"), Reagan's VP (1981-89). Republican primary 1988: Bush faced Sen Bob Dole (KS, Senate Majority Leader); Rep Jack Kemp (NY conservative); Pat Robertson (TV evangelist); former DE Gov Pete du Pont. Bush won March 8, 1988 Super Tuesday (17 mostly Southern primaries); 39 of 41 primaries. Republican Convention New Orleans August 15-18, 1988. Bush selected Sen Dan Quayle (IN, 41) VP - controversial. Quayle inexperienced + Indiana National Guard service avoided Vietnam draft. Bush August 18, 1988 acceptance speech famous lines: "Read my lips: no new taxes" (speechwriter Peggy Noonan); "thousand points of light" civic-society volunteerism vision. Speech transformed Bush's image from passive Reagan VP to active conservative leader. Democratic primary 1988 wide-open "Seven Dwarfs" race. Gary Hart expected frontrunner but withdrew May 1987 after Donna Rice scandal. "Seven Dwarfs": Sen Joe Biden (DE) - withdrew September 1987 over plagiarism; Rep Dick Gephardt (MO); Sen Al Gore Jr (TN); Rev Jesse Jackson; Sen Paul Simon (IL); former Gov

Bruce Babbitt (AZ); MA Gov Michael Dukakis.

Dukakis won nomination. 54, Greek American technocrat, MA Governor (1975-79, 1983-91). "Massachusetts Miracle" framing - MA economy grew faster than national average 1983-88. Won 18 primaries; Jackson 11. Dukakis 1,792 delegates; Jackson 1,023.

Democratic Convention Atlanta July 18-21, 1988 nominated Dukakis 1st ballot. Sen Lloyd Bentsen (TX, Senator since 1971; moderate Southern Democrat) VP - balanced ticket MA-TX + liberal-moderate.

Dukakis July 21, 1988 acceptance speech: "This election is not about ideology, it's about competence." Politically devastating - positioned Dukakis as soulless technocrat.

Campaign Republican negative advertising masterpiece. Bush campaign manager Lee Atwater + 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). African American convict Willie Horton committed rape + assault while on Massachusetts weekend furlough program under Dukakis. Ad framed Dukakis soft on crime with racial undertones. Atwater: "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 - prisoners walking through revolving door as turnstile clicked. Reinforced Willie Horton framing.

(3) September 1988 "Boston Harbor" ad attacked Dukakis environmental record (MA had polluted Boston Harbor).

(4) "Tank ad" using video of Dukakis riding M1 Abrams tank wearing oversized helmet at Sterling Heights MI plant September 13, 1988. Made Dukakis appear foolish + amateurish.

October 5, 1988 VP debate Omaha. Quayle compared himself to JFK's congressional experience. Bentsen: "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 didn't change election.

October 13, 1988 second presidential debate. 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..." Emotionless policy-focused response politically devastating. Voters wanted personal outrage about hypothetical rape/murder of his wife. Dukakis confirmed "soulless technocrat" framing.

Bush 426 EV; Dukakis 111. Bush 40 states; Dukakis 10 + DC. Popular: Bush 48,886,597 (53.4%); Dukakis 41,809,476 (45.6%); margin 7,077,121.

Geographic pattern: Bush's 40 states all South + Mountain West + most Midwest + much Northeast + Pacific including California (last Republican CA victory). Dukakis's 10 states + DC: Massachusetts (home), New York, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, West Virginia, Rhode Island + DC. 1988 map previewed post-1992 Democratic coalition.

Bush inaugurated January 20, 1989. Major achievements: (1) Late 1989 Cold War end - Berlin Wall fell November 9, 1989; Eastern European Communist regimes collapsed; German reunification October 3, 1990; Soviet Union dissolved December 25, 1991. Bush refused "dance on the wall" rhetoric. (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% post-war. (3) Americans with Disabilities Act July 26, 1990. (4) Clean Air Act amendments November 1990. (5) Civil Rights Act of 1991. (6) NAFTA negotiated 1991-92.

But Bush's November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act raised top income tax rate 28% ’ 31% as part of deficit-reduction deal with Democratic Congress. Violated "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge. Politically devastating for 1992 re-election. Conservative Republicans + Ross Perot 1992 third-party challenge damaged Bush.

1990-91 recession + slow recovery damaged Bush. By 1992 approval fell from 89% (March 1991) to 29% (July 1992). Bush's 1992 loss to Clinton (370-168 EV) ended his presidency.

1988 election structural significance: (1) Extended Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance into Bush 1989-93 third Reagan-era term. (2) Bush 1988 negative campaign (Atwater + Ailes) became structural template for subsequent Republican negative advertising. (3) Dukakis defeat reinforced "Democratic Party can't win" narrative that shaped Clinton 1992 DLC centrism.

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

George H.W. Bush
41st U.S. president (1989-93). Reagan's VP (1981-89). Won 1988 with 426-111 EV. Lost 1992 to Clinton 370-168 EV.

"Read my lips: no new taxes"
Bush's famous 1988 acceptance speech line. Operationally violated November 5, 1990.

Dan Quayle
1988 Republican VP nominee. Bush's VP 1989-93.

Lee Atwater
Bush 1988 campaign manager (1988); later RNC Chair (1989-91). Pioneered modern Republican negative campaign techniques. Died March 29, 1991 from brain tumor at age 40. Made deathbed apology for Willie Horton ad.

Michael Dukakis
1988 Democratic presidential nominee. Massachusetts Governor (1975-79, 1983-91). Lost 426-111 EV.

Willie Horton ad
September 21, 1988 independent expenditure ad with racial undertones.

"You're no Jack Kennedy"
Bentsen's October 5, 1988 VP debate response to Quayle's comparison of his congressional experience to JFK's. "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.

Republican National Convention Acceptance Address

GEORGE H.W. BUSH, AUGUST 18, 1988

Bush delivered this acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans on August 18, 1988. Speechwriter Peggy Noonan crafted key passages including "Read my lips: no new taxes" and "a thousand points of light." The "Read my lips" pledge was politically masterful conservative commitment but would be operationally violated November 5, 1990. The speech transformed Bush's image from passive Reagan VP to active conservative leader. The "thousand points of light" vision articulated Bush's alternative to federal welfare-state programs: civil-society volunteerism. The speech is widely cited as one of the most politically effective convention acceptance speeches in U.S. history.

> *"I'm the one who will not raise taxes. My opponent now says he'll raise them as a last resort, or a third resort. But when a politician talks like that, you know that's one resort he'll be checking into. My opponent won't rule out raising taxes. But I will. 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. 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. We will work with them, we will give them our help, we will give them our support, and we will give them the respect that they so richly deserve."*

Bush, "Republican National Convention Acceptance Address" (New Orleans, August 18, 1988). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 1988 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Bush win in 1988?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who was Bush's VP running mate in 1988?

( ) A. Bob Dole
( ) B. Dan Quayle
( ) C. Jack Kemp
( ) D. Pat Robertson

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Bush says "they'll push again, and I'll say to them, read my lips: no new taxes." What is the rhetorical purpose, and how was the promise operationally violated?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Willie Horton ad and why is it controversial?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1988 election map, identify Bush's 40 states and Dukakis's 10 states + DC. What does the geographic pattern preview about post-1992 partisan alignment?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

426. Bush 426; Dukakis 111.

AP students should know the 426-111 split.

QUESTION 2

Dan Quayle. Sen Dan Quayle of Indiana (41). Controversial pick - inexperienced + Indiana National Guard service avoided Vietnam draft. Bush's VP 1989-93.

AP students should know Quayle.

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. The full passage: "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%). Politically devastating for 1992 re-election.

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

QUESTION 4

Bush's "Read my lips: no new taxes" uses three rhetorical strategies: (1) Repetition + escalation - "they'll push... I'll say no... they'll push again, and I'll say to them" creates dramatic rhetorical structure. (2) Body-language reference - "read my lips" invokes physical communication beyond words, emphasizing personal commitment. (3) Absolute commitment - no conditions, no exceptions, no exit clauses. The rhetorical purpose: establish Bush as iron-willed conservative tax-cutter who could be trusted to maintain Reagan-era tax framework. The promise was politically masterful in 1988 - voters who wanted continued low taxes had unambiguous Bush commitment. The promise was operationally violated November 5, 1990 with Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. Bush had negotiated with Democratic Congress on deficit reduction. The compromise included tax increases (top income tax rate 28%'31%; gasoline tax increase; payroll tax cap increase) + spending caps. Bush's structural argument: the deficit threatened economic stability + the bipartisan compromise was necessary. But the violation was politically devastating: (1) Conservative Republican base felt betrayed - Pat Buchanan 1992 primary challenge mobilized conservative anger. (2) Democrats used "Read my lips: I lied" framing. (3) Ross Perot 1992 third-party challenge attracted disaffected Republican voters. (4) Clinton 1992 won 370-168 EV largely through Republican coalition fractures. The structural lesson: absolute campaign promises constrain subsequent governance flexibility. Subsequent Republican candidates (notably 2001 Bush 43 tax cuts; 2017 Trump tax cuts) avoided absolute pledges; some incorporated tax-cut promises (e.g., Grover Norquist Americans for Tax Reform "Taxpayer Protection Pledge" since 1986) but with more conditional language.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical purpose and structural violation.

QUESTION 5

The Willie Horton ad was September 21, 1988 independent expenditure television ad by National Security Political Action Committee (NSPAC). 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. Controversial because: (1) Racial undertones - prominent featuring of African American mugshot reinforced racial associations between crime + African American men. (2) Selective framing - furlough program had been initiated by Republican Governor Frank Sargent 1972 + maintained by Dukakis. (3) Atwater's "Willie Horton is Dukakis's running mate" comment confirmed racially exploitative intent. (4) Lee Atwater's 1991 deathbed apology - "in 1988, fighting Dukakis, I said that I 'would strip the bark off the little bastard' and 'make Willie Horton his running mate.' I am sorry for both statements: the first for its naked cruelty, the second because it makes me sound racist, which I am not." Subsequent political analysts have studied Willie Horton ad as model of racially coded campaign advertising. Subsequent Republican strategy (Lee Atwater + Roger Ailes + Karl Rove + Steve Bannon) was associated with the Willie Horton template: identify specific vulnerability + amplify through paid + earned media + exploit racial/cultural coding. The 1988 Bush campaign was widely cited as the structural template for modern Republican negative advertising.

AP students should be able to articulate the controversy.

QUESTION 6

Bush states (40): all of South + all Mountain West + most Midwest + much Northeast + Pacific including California (last Republican California victory). Dukakis states (10 + DC): Massachusetts (home), New York, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, West Virginia, Rhode Island + DC. The 1988 map previews post-1992 Democratic coalition in three ways: (1) Northeastern industrial states (NY, MA, RI, CT - Bush carried CT 1988 but it would go Democratic 1992+) becoming structurally Democratic. (2) West Coast (WA, OR + eventually CA in 1992+) becoming structurally Democratic. (3) Upper Midwest (MN, WI, IA, MI - Bush carried MI 1988 but it would go Democratic 1992+) becoming structurally Democratic. The Reagan-era Republican coalition - South + Mountain West + suburban-Northeast + working-class whites + religious conservatives - was beginning to show structural cracks in the Northeast + West Coast. Clinton 1992 + Obama 2008 + Biden 2020 would exploit these cracks to assemble winning Democratic coalitions without the Solid South. The 1988 map is structurally consequential as the bridge between Reagan-era Republican dominance and post-1992 Democratic coastal-Midwest coalition.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural preview.