1988

George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis

A 75-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 + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1988: George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis

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 1988 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1988 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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. Reagan could not run 1988 (22A). Bush 64, CT Sen Prescott Bush's son, Yale 1948, WWII Navy fighter pilot, Texas oil executive, U.S. Rep (TX 1967-71), UN Ambassador (1971-73), RNC Chair (1973-74), envoy to PRC (1974-75), CIA Director (1976-77), 1980 Republican presidential candidate (lost to Reagan), Reagan's VP (1981-89). Republican primary 1988: Bush won 39 of 41 primaries over Dole + Kemp + Robertson + du Pont. Republican Convention New Orleans August 15-18, 1988 nominated Bush-Quayle. Bush August 18 acceptance speech: "Read my lips: no new taxes" (speechwriter Peggy Noonan); "thousand points of light." Politically transformative. Democratic primary 1988 "Seven Dwarfs": Biden withdrew September 1987 (plagiarism); Gephardt; Gore; Jackson; Simon; Babbitt; Dukakis. Gary Hart withdrew May 1987 (Donna Rice scandal). Dukakis won nomination. 54, Greek American MA Governor (1975-79, 1983-91). "Massachusetts Miracle." Won 18 primaries; Jackson 11. Democratic Convention Atlanta July 18-21, 1988 nominated Dukakis. Sen Lloyd Bentsen (TX, moderate Southern Democrat) VP. Dukakis acceptance speech: "This election is not about ideology, it's about compe-

tence." Politically devastating framing.

Campaign Republican negative advertising masterpiece. Atwater + Ailes ran sophisticated negative campaign. Famous attacks: September 21, 1988 Willie Horton ad (NSPAC independent expenditure); October 5, 1988 "Revolving Door" Bush ad; September 1988 "Boston Harbor" ad; "Tank ad" September 13, 1988 Sterling Heights MI.

October 5, 1988 VP debate Omaha. Quayle compared to JFK. Bentsen: "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." Politically devastating for Quayle.

October 13, 1988 second presidential debate. Bernard Shaw asked Dukakis hypothetical about Kitty Dukakis rape/murder. Dukakis emotionless policy response politically devastating - confirmed "soulless technocrat" framing.

Bush 426 EV / Dukakis 111. Bush 40 states; Dukakis 10 + DC. Popular: Bush 53.4%; Dukakis 45.6%. Margin 7,077,121.

Geographic: Bush's 40 states all South + Mountain West + most Midwest + much Northeast + Pacific including California (last Republican California victory). Dukakis's 10 states: MA, NY, WI, IA, MN, OR, WA, HI, WV, RI + DC.

Bush inaugurated January 20, 1989. Major achievements: Cold War end (Berlin Wall fell November 9, 1989; German reunification October 3, 1990; Soviet Union dissolved December 25, 1991); Persian Gulf War January 16 - February 28, 1991 (Operation Desert Storm, 34-nation coalition, ~292 American military deaths, Bush approval 89% post-war); Americans with Disabilities Act July 26, 1990; Clean Air Act amendments November 1990; Civil Rights Act of 1991; NAFTA negotiated 1991-92.

Bush November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act raised top income tax rate 28%’31%. Violated "Read my lips" pledge. Politically devastating for 1992.

1990-91 recession + slow recovery damaged Bush. 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.

The 1988 Bush victory was last of 12-year Republican presidential streak 1980-92. Reagan 1980 + 1984 + Bush 1988. The 1992 Bush loss to Clinton would interrupt Republican-conservative ascendance but only briefly: Bush 43 2000 + 2004 victories

		would continue the era through 2008. The Atwater-Ailes negative campaign infrastructure structurally consequential. Lee Atwater (Bush 1988 campaign manager; later RNC Chair 1989-91) died March 29, 1991 from brain tumor at age 40 - made deathbed apology for Willie Horton ad. Roger Ailes (1988 Bush media strategist) founded Fox News 1996 with Rupert Murdoch + structurally shaped conservative media for next 25 years. Ailes was forced out of Fox News July 2016 over sexual harassment scandal. The Atwater-Ailes infrastructure produced Republican electoral wins 1988 + 2000 + 2004 + 2016 + 2024. The Dukakis 1988 defeat structurally shaped Democratic strategy. Dukakis-style technocratic Northern liberalism was perceived as electoral poison. Clinton 1992 Democratic Leadership Council centrism + Southern Democratic identity directly responded to the Dukakis 1988 failure. Subsequent Democratic candidates (Gore 2000; Kerry 2004; Obama 2008+2012; Hillary Clinton 2016; Biden 2020; Harris 2024) attempted various coalition strategies to address the post-Dukakis structural challenges. The 1988 election was thus the structural template for what Democrats would attempt to avoid. 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 1988 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

George H.W. Bush
41st U.S. president (1989-93).

"Read my lips: no new taxes"
Bush's 1988 acceptance speech pledge. Violated November 1990.

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

Lee Atwater
Bush 1988 campaign manager. Pioneered modern Republican negative campaign. Died March 29, 1991. Made deathbed apology for Willie Horton ad.

Michael Dukakis
1988 Democratic presidential nominee. MA Governor.

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.

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.

> *"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 (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 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 violated?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how Bush's November 1990 tax increase damaged his 1992 re-election prospects.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

AP students should know Quayle.

QUESTION 3

Bush's "Read my lips: no new taxes" Republican Convention acceptance speech August 18, 1988. Speechwriter Peggy Noonan. Politically masterful pledge. Operationally violated November 5, 1990 (top income tax rate 28%’31% in Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act).

AP students should know.

QUESTION 4

Bush's "Read my lips" uses rhetorical strategies: repetition + escalation; body-language reference; absolute commitment. Promise was operationally violated November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. Politically devastating: conservative Republican base felt betrayed (Pat Buchanan 1992 primary challenge); Democrats used "Read my lips: I lied" framing; Ross Perot 1992 third-party challenge attracted disaffected Republicans; Clinton 1992 won 370-168 EV largely through Republican coalition fractures.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 5

Willie Horton ad September 21, 1988 NSPAC independent expenditure. African American convict who committed rape + assault while on Massachusetts weekend furlough under Dukakis. Controversial: racial undertones; selective framing (furlough started by Republican Governor 1972); Atwater "running mate" comment confirmed exploitative intent; Atwater 1991 deathbed apology. Template for modern Republican negative advertising.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

Bush's November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act tax increase damaged 1992 re-election in five structural ways: (1) Conservative Republican base felt betrayed. Pat Buchanan 1992 primary challenge mobilized conservative anger; Buchanan won 37% in February 1992 New Hampshire primary; ultimately won ~3 million primary votes. (2) "Read my lips: I lied" framing by Democrats made the pledge violation politically toxic. (3) Ross Perot 1992 third-party challenge (19% popular vote; 0 EV) attracted disaffected Republican voters who would have voted Bush in normal partisan election. Perot took ~37% of his voters from Bush (according to exit polls). (4) Clinton 1992 won 43% popular vote vs Bush 37.5% + Perot 19% - Bush's loss was structurally produced by Republican coalition fractures. (5) Conservative-movement infrastructure (Newt Gingrich, Pat Robertson, Rush Limbaugh) developed anti-establishment Republican identity that would dominate 1990s+ politics. The structural lesson: absolute campaign promises constrain governance flexibility + create political vulnerabilities when broken.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural damage.

QUESTION 7

Bush states (40): all South + all Mountain West + most Midwest + much Northeast + Pacific including California (last Republican California victory). Dukakis states (10 + DC): MA, NY, WI, IA, MN, OR, WA, HI, WV, RI + DC. 1988 map previews post-1992 Democratic coalition: Northeastern industrial states + West Coast + Upper Midwest becoming structurally Democratic. Clinton 1992 + Obama 2008 + Biden 2020 would exploit these cracks to assemble winning Democratic coalitions without Solid South. 1988 map is structural bridge between Reagan-era Republican dominance and post-1992 Democratic coastal-Midwest coalition.

AP students should be able to articulate.

Discussion prompts

1. Bush's 1990 tax increase violated his "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge. Identify three structural reasons specific campaign promises can structurally constrain subsequent presidential governance.

2. The Bush 1988 campaign's negative advertising (Lee Atwater + Roger Ailes) became the structural template for subsequent Republican campaigns. Identify three specific 1992-2024 Republican campaigns that operationalized the Bush 1988 template.