AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1988

George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis

A 105-minute lesson on the 1988 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 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 (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
4. Primary source B (DBQ pair)
5. Worksheet (8 questions)
6. Long-essay-question + rubric
7. Answer key + discussion

1988: George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis

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 1981-88 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 (22A). Bush 64, Reagan's VP, diverse career resume. Republican primary 1988: Bush won over Dole + Kemp + Robertson + du Pont. Republican Convention New Orleans August 15-18, 1988 nominated Bush-Quayle. Bush "Read my lips: no new taxes" + "thousand points of light" acceptance speech (Peggy Noonan). 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. MA Governor. "Massachusetts Miracle." Won 18 primaries; Jackson 11. Democratic Convention Atlanta July 18-21, 1988 nominated Dukakis-Bentsen. Dukakis "election is about competence not ideology" framing politically devastating. Atwater + Ailes negative campaign masterpiece. Willie Horton ad September 21, 1988; Revolving Door ad October 5; Boston Harbor ad; Tank ad September 13. October 5, 1988 VP debate: Bentsen "Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy" to Quayle. October 13, 1988 second presidential debate: Dukakis emotionless response to Bernard Shaw hypothetical about Kitty Dukakis rape/murder confirmed "soulless technocrat" framing.

Bush 426 EV; Dukakis 111. Bush 40 states; Dukakis 10 + DC. Margin 7,077,121.

Bush inaugurated January 20, 1989. Major achievements: Cold War end (Berlin Wall November 9, 1989; German reunification October 3, 1990; Soviet Union dissolved December 25, 1991); Persian Gulf War Jan-Feb 1991 (Operation Desert Storm); Americans with Disabilities Act July 26, 1990; Clean Air Act 1990; Civil Rights Act 1991; NAFTA negotiated.

Bush November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act tax increase violated "Read my lips" pledge. 1990-91 recession damaged Bush. Approval fell 89%'29%. 1992 Bush loss to Clinton 370-168 EV.

1988 election structural significance: (1) Extended Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance through Bush 1989-93. (2) Bush 1988 negative campaign template. (3) Dukakis defeat shaped Clinton 1992 DLC centrism.

The Atwater-Ailes negative campaign infrastructure structurally consequential. Lee Atwater (RNC Chair 1989-91) died March 29, 1991 at 40 - deathbed apology for Willie Horton. Roger Ailes founded Fox News 1996 + structurally shaped conservative media for 25 years. Ailes forced out of Fox News July 2016 over sexual harassment.

The 1988 Bush victory completed the 12-year Republican presidential streak 1980-92. Reagan 1980 + 1984 + Bush 1988. The 1992 Bush loss to Clinton briefly interrupted Republican-conservative ascendance: Bush 43 2000 + 2004 victories continued the era through 2008.

The 1988-1992 four-year transition can be analyzed structurally. Bush 1988 = peak of Reagan-era coalition assembly. Bush 1990 tax-increase = structural fracture of Reagan-era anti-tax coalition. 1992 Bush loss = structural verdict on Republican coalition fractures. Clinton 1992 victory = structural Democratic interruption enabled by Republican coalition fractures rather than by Democratic coalition strength. Clinton 1992 + 1996 victories operated within Reagan-era policy framework (welfare reform 1996; balanced budgets late 1990s; financial deregulation 1999). The structural Republican-conservative ascendance resumed under Bush 43 2000-09.

The Bush 1988 acceptance speech can be analyzed retrospectively as one of the most politically consequential speeches in U.S. history. The "Read my lips" pledge was politically masterful in 1988 + politically devastating in 1990 + structurally consequential for 1992 + influenced subsequent Republican campaign rhetoric for 30+ years. Subsequent Republican candidates have generally avoided absolute pledges (or made them conditional). The "thousand points of light" framing established Bush's alternative to federal welfare-state expansion - civic-society volunteerism. The framing influenced subsequent conservative thinking on social policy (compassionate conservatism Bush 43 2000+; faith-based initiatives).

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

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

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

Dan Quayle
1988 Republican VP nominee.

Lee Atwater
Bush 1988 campaign manager.

Operation Desert Storm
January 16 - February 28, 1991 Persian Gulf War. 34-nation coalition led by U.S. under Bush + Gen Norman Schwarzkopf liberated Kuwait from Iraqi August 1990 invasion. ~292 American military deaths. Bush approval reached 89% post-war.

Michael Dukakis
1988 Democratic presidential nominee. MA Governor.

Willie Horton ad
September 21, 1988 independent expenditure ad.

"You're no Jack Kennedy"
Bentsen October 5, 1988 VP debate response to Quayle.

Roger Ailes
Bush 1988 media strategist. Founded Fox News 1996 with Rupert Murdoch. Forced out July 2016 over sexual harassment scandal.

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.

> *"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.

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

Republican National Convention Acceptance Address

GEORGE H.W. BUSH, AUGUST 18, 1988

“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.

SOURCE B

Lee Atwater Deathbed Apology (Life Magazine interview)

LEE ATWATER (INTERVIEW BY TODD BREWSTER), FEBRUARY 1991

“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. My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood. The 80's were about acquiring - acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty.”

Atwater, Lee. Interview by Todd Brewster, "Lee Atwater's Last Campaign," Life Magazine, February 1991. Public domain (deceased author, journalistic interview).

The 1988 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 (Bush 1988 acceptance) articulating the anti-tax pledge. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Atwater 1991 apology) acknowledging campaign moral costs. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources are 1988-1991 political acknowledgments but from different positions. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Atwater's "my illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood" articulates structural reflection on 1980s political culture. What rhetorical purpose does this serve?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific 1992-2024 Republican campaigns that operationalized the Atwater-Ailes 1988 negative campaign template.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

In what year did Lee Atwater die?

( ) A. 1989
( ) B. 1991
( ) C. 1993
( ) D. 1995

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

In what year did Roger Ailes found Fox News?

( ) A. 1991
( ) B. 1993
( ) C. 1996
( ) D. 2001

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1988 election about Reagan-extension, negative-campaign-template, or Democratic-narrative? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Bush's August 1988 acceptance speech (Source A) articulated the "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge + "thousand points of light" framework that defined his 1988 campaign + structurally constrained his 1989-93 presidency. Atwater's February 1991 deathbed apology (Source B) acknowledged the moral costs of the 1988 Willie Horton campaign strategy. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1968-2024 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1988 election represented (a) the extension of Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance, (b) the establishment of the Atwater-Ailes negative campaign template, or (c) the reinforcement of the "Democratic Party can't win" narrative. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the Reagan-extension-vs-negative-campaign-template-vs-Democratic-narrative axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Goldwater 1964 campaign, the Nixon 1972 landslide, the Reagan 1984 election, the 1990 tax increase, the 1992 Clinton election, the Bush 43 2000-2008 victories, the Trump 2016 + 2024 victories. 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: "read my lips: no new taxes", "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", "the Congress will push me to raise taxes and I'll say no". The "read my lips: no new taxes" phrase is the most distinctive.

Bush's framing established the anti-tax pledge.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "I am sorry for both statements: the first for its naked cruelty, the second because it makes me sound racist, which I am not", "my illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood", "you can acquire all you want and still feel empty". The "naked cruelty" + "sound racist" phrase is the most distinctive acknowledgment.

Atwater's framing acknowledged campaign moral costs.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Bush's 1988 campaign-launching acceptance speech - articulated to mobilize conservative voters + establish Bush as Reagan-era continuity candidate. The function is to commit Bush to conservative policy framework + assemble Republican coalition. Source B is Atwater's 1991 deathbed reflection - articulated 3 years after the 1988 campaign + 1 month before his death. The function is to acknowledge moral costs of 1988 negative campaign + offer late-career repentance. Together, the sources reveal the structural arc of the 1988 Bush campaign: politically masterful campaign that operationally violated promises (1990 tax increase) and morally compromised personnel (Atwater's deathbed regret). The structural lesson: politically effective campaigns can have long-term moral + political costs that emerge after the immediate electoral victory.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural arc.

QUESTION 4

Atwater's "little heart, a lot of brotherhood" reflection serves four rhetorical purposes: (1) Moral retrospection - acknowledging that his 1980s political career had been morally inadequate. (2) Cultural critique - the "80's were about acquiring" framing positions 1980s political culture (Reagan-era + Wall Street + Atwater's own work) as structurally lacking moral substance. (3) Personal-political integration - Atwater connects his individual moral journey to broader social-political concerns. (4) Late-career absolution attempt - the apology represents Atwater's attempt to repair his moral standing before death. The structural lesson: deathbed political reflections can offer cultural-historical assessment that immediate political action makes impossible. Atwater's 1991 reflection has been cited by subsequent Republican strategists as a moral caution. But the immediate impact was limited: the Republican Party did not abandon Atwater's 1988 template. Subsequent campaigns continued to use racially coded messaging (1992 Bush; 2004 Bush; 2016 Trump). Atwater's deathbed reflection became a cultural-historical document about the moral costs of effective political work rather than a structural reform of Republican campaign practice.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical purpose.

QUESTION 5

Three specific 1992-2024 Republican campaigns that operationalized the Atwater-Ailes 1988 negative campaign template: (1) Bush 1992 (although Bush lost) - "Slick Willie" framing of Clinton + Gennifer Flowers scandal coverage + draft-dodger framing. Continued Atwater approach despite his death. (2) Bush 2000 - "compassionate conservatism" framing + Texas gubernatorial campaign opposition research + 2000 South Carolina primary "John McCain has an illegitimate Black child" rumor (politically devastating against McCain). Karl Rove (Bush 2000 strategist + senior adviser 2001-07) continued Atwater approach with refined demographic targeting. (3) Bush 2004 - "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" independent expenditure attacks on John Kerry's Vietnam War record (May-September 2004). Kerry's decorated Navy service was structurally undermined through coordinated independent expenditures. Bush won 2004 286-251 EV. (4) Trump 2016 - "Crooked Hillary" framing + Hillary Clinton email-server scandal exploitation + 2016 birtherism vs Obama (Trump's 2011-12 racial conspiracy theories). Trump 2016 won 304-227 EV. (5) Trump 2024 - "Comrade Kamala" framing + Hunter Biden laptop coverage + culture-war attacks on Harris + January 6 election-fraud framing. Trump 2024 won 312-226 EV. The cumulative effect: the Atwater-Ailes 1988 template was operationalized through Bush 2000-04, Trump 2016, Trump 2024. The template produced 4 of 8 Republican presidential victories 1988-2024 (Bush 1988, Bush 2000, Bush 2004, Trump 2016, Trump 2024 vs Bush 1992 loss + Dole 1996 loss + McCain 2008 loss + Romney 2012 loss + Trump 2020 loss). The Atwater-Ailes template was structurally effective when combined with right political conditions (Republican-leaning electorate; specific candidate vulnerabilities; coordinated paid + earned media).

AP students should be able to articulate multiple operationalizations.

QUESTION 6

1991. Lee Atwater died March 29, 1991 at age 40 from inoperable brain tumor diagnosed March 1990. He had been Bush 1988 campaign manager (1988) and Republican National Committee Chair (January 1989 - March 1991). His February 1991 Life Magazine deathbed interview included his apology for the Willie Horton campaign strategy.

AP students should know the 1991 death year.

QUESTION 7

1996. Roger Ailes founded Fox News on October 7, 1996 with Rupert Murdoch (News Corp). Ailes had been Bush's 1988 media strategist + CNBC president 1993-96. Fox News structurally shaped conservative media for the next 25 years. Ailes was forced out of Fox News July 21, 2016 over sexual harassment scandal. He died May 18, 2017 at age 77.

AP students should know the 1996 Fox News founding.

QUESTION 8

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

The thesis sketch is preparatory.