1988

George H. W. Bush vs Michael Dukakis

A 20-minute lesson on the 1988 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, 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%

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1988

Reagan could not run in 1988 (22nd Amendment). His VP George H.W. Bush was likely Republican nominee. Bush was 64, son of CT Senator Prescott Bush, Yale grad 1948 (Skull and Bones), Texas oil executive, 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), Reagan's VP (1981-89). Bush had lost 1980 Republican primary to Reagan. By 1988 Bush had served Reagan loyally for 8 years.

Bush faced primary challenges. Sen Bob Dole (KS Senate Majority Leader); Rep Jack Kemp (NY conservative); Pat Robertson (TV evangelist). Bush won March 8, 1988 Super Tuesday + structural establishment support.

Republican Convention New Orleans August 15-18, 1988. Bush picked Sen Dan Quayle of Indiana (41) as VP - controversial pick. Quayle was inexperienced + had received Indiana National Guard service avoiding Vietnam draft. Bush's convention acceptance speech famous line: "Read my lips: no new taxes."

Democrats had wide-open field. "Seven Dwarfs" primary: Sen Joe Biden (DE); Rep Dick Gephardt (MO); Sen Al Gore Jr (TN);

Rev Jesse Jackson; Sen Paul Simon (IL); former Governor Bruce Babbitt (AZ); Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis. Biden withdrew September 1987 over plagiarism + speech-borrowing accusations. Gary Hart had been expected 1988 frontrunner but withdrew May 1987 after Donna Rice scandal.

Look at picture. That George H.W. Bush - won 1988 + lost 1992.

Dukakis won Democratic nomination. 54-year-old Greek American governor of Massachusetts (1975-79, 1983-91). Technocrat - "Massachusetts Miracle" economic-policy framing. Dukakis picked Sen Lloyd Bentsen of Texas as VP - balanced ticket regionally.

Democratic Convention Atlanta July 18-21, 1988. Dukakis acceptance speech July 21: "This election is not about ideology, it's about competence." Politically devastating - Bush exploited the framing to attack Dukakis as soulless technocrat.

Campaign brutal. Republican Lee Atwater + Roger Ailes (later Fox News founder) ran sophisticated negative campaign. Famous attacks: (1) Willie Horton ad September 21, 1988 - independent expenditure by National Security Political Action Committee. Furloughed Massachusetts convict Willie Horton (African American) had committed rape and assault while on weekend furlough program. Ad framed Dukakis as soft on crime + racial undertones.



George H.W. Bush, the 41st U.S. president. He won the 1988 election as Reagan's VP but lost 1992 to Clinton.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 41st U.S. president after the 1988 election?

2.

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

3.

What was the Willie Horton ad?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1988 George H.W. Bush - Reagan's VP for 8 years - ran against Michael Dukakis, governor of Massachusetts. Bush had said "Read my lips: no new taxes" at Republican convention. Bush won big. But he'd break that promise in 1990 and lose 1992.

Answer key

1.

George H.W. Bush. He won 426 electoral votes to Michael Dukakis's 111. Popular vote: Bush 53.4% vs Dukakis 45.6%. Bush carried 40 states. Bush was Reagan's VP 1981-89. He became 41st president.

AP students should know Bush as 41st president.

2.

Bush's "Read my lips: no new taxes" promise was his famous Republican Convention acceptance speech line in New Orleans on August 18, 1988. Speechwriter Peggy Noonan crafted the line. The promise: "And 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." Politically masterful conservative pledge in 1988. But Bush operationally violated the promise November 5, 1990 with the 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. The structural lesson: specific campaign promises can be politically devastating when broken.

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

3.

The Willie Horton ad was a September 21, 1988 independent expenditure television advertisement by National Security Political Action Committee (Larry McCarthy producer). The ad featured Willie Horton, an African American convict who had been serving a life sentence in Massachusetts for first-degree murder but had committed a 1986 rape + assault while on a Massachusetts weekend furlough program under Governor Dukakis's policies. The ad framed Dukakis as soft on crime with strong racial undertones. The ad showed Horton's mugshot prominently. Independent expenditure (technically not produced by Bush campaign) but Bush campaign's "revolving door" ad featured similar content. 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." Politically devastating + structurally controversial. Widely cited as racially coded campaign advertising. Subsequent Republican strategy was associated with the Willie Horton model: identify a specific vulnerability + amplify through paid + earned media + exploit racial coding. The Willie Horton ad became cultural shorthand for racially coded political advertising.

AP students should know the Willie Horton ad.