

# Bill of Rights in Action



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## THE ELECTION OF 1980

In 1976, Ronald Reagan competed with President Gerald Ford for the Republican Party nomination. He narrowly lost. Ford then went on to lose the general election that year to Democrat Jimmy Carter. Four years later, Reagan's fortunes changed. He got the Republican nomination and then defeated the incumbent President Carter in what was one of the most consequential elections in U.S. history. How did Reagan do it?

Many Americans in the 1970s experienced a growing distrust of government and the actions of those in power. The Watergate scandal in the early part of the decade led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon, a Republican. This was followed by Nixon's pardon by his Republican successor Gerald Ford. The increasingly unpopular U.S. engagement in the Vietnam War finally ended in defeat in 1975 with a death toll of 58,000 American military service members.

In 1976, Democratic Party candidate James Earl "Jimmy" Carter, Jr. ran on a message of restoring integrity in government. He edged out President Ford in the 1976 election with 51 percent of the popular vote, and with 297 electoral votes to Ford's 240.

Carter's subsequent presidency was dogged, however, by rising inflation and interest rates, which he tried to control by cutting deficit spending. A national energy shortage in 1979 reached a crisis level and caused growing anger and resentment among many Americans. Carter battled public perceptions that he was incompetent.

In response to this, Carter told the nation in a televised speech on July 15, 1979, that it faced a "crisis of confidence," and the "most important task" facing the American people was to restore faith in government to solve problems. He hoped to repair his image as a weak president.

Then, in November 1979, a group of college students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Iran, and



Then-candidate Ronald Reagan and President Jimmy Carter shake hands after completing their only one-on-one presidential debate on October 28, 1980.

Cleveland Press Collection, Michael Schwartz Library, Cleveland State University

took hostage over 50 American citizens. For the remainder of his presidency, Carter couldn't get the hostages freed.

By the time the 1980 election season began, the Republicans sought a candidate who they thought would restore Americans' trust in their leaders, rebuild the economy, and most importantly restore the U.S. reputation globally.

### The Candidates

#### Ronald Reagan

Reagan had had a successful career in radio and acting. In 1962, he switched from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party. In 1964, Reagan publicly announced his support for the presidential campaign of Senator Barry Goldwater, a small-government conservative Republican from Arizona who opposed the Civil Rights Act of that year. Reagan's career shift from acting to politics began.

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President Jimmy Carter greeting a crowd in Columbus, Ohio, in May 1980.

From 1967-1975, Reagan was twice elected governor of California. In this office, he earned a reputation as a leading spokesperson for a growing conservative movement that opposed the cultural radicalism of the 1960s and supported a limited role for the government in solving social problems. After barely losing his 1976 primary bid against Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan easily won the Republican Party primary election and the nomination in 1980, beating out ten other Republican candidates.

Among those he beat were former director of the Central Intelligence Agency George H.W. Bush from Texas and Representative John Anderson from Reagan's home state of Illinois. John Anderson dropped out in the spring of 1980. But some favorable polling led him to re-enter the race as an independent (not representing any political party).

George H.W. Bush criticized Reagan's policy of deregulating businesses as "voodoo economics." Deregulation means removing government restrictions on how businesses hire and fire workers, invest profits, and make general business decisions. But Reagan strategically chose Bush as his vice-presidential running mate.

### **Jimmy Carter**

Jimmy Carter was a successful peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia. He got involved in politics in Georgia as a vocal proponent of school integration in the early 1960s. He served in the Georgia State Senate from 1963 to 1967 and later served as Georgia's governor from 1971 to 1975. Unlike Reagan, Carter never left the Democratic Party.

In the run-up to the 1980 election, Carter's poor standing in polls prompted several Democrats to run against him in the primaries. One of them was Senator Edward "Ted" Kennedy of Massachusetts.

Kennedy was well-known as a prominent liberal Democrat and brother of President John F. Kennedy. Ted Kennedy strongly criticized Carter for his policies of deregulating the oil and airline industries. Kennedy had

also introduced a bill for national health insurance that Carter opposed. Some of Kennedy's supporters even called Carter a "secret Republican."

Carter beat Kennedy in all but 10 state primaries. Without a clear shot at winning a majority of delegates, many urged Kennedy to drop out of the race. But Kennedy did not drop out, even after Carter won a clear majority on the first ballot at the Democratic Party convention. He initiated a brief fight over convention rules but finally conceded the race to Carter. The general election contest between Reagan, Carter, and independent John Anderson would now begin.

### **Contrasting Visions**

In 1980, Carter said the election was "the sharpest difference in the voters' choice that I remember in my lifetime." He called himself and Vice President Walter Mondale a "tested and trustworthy team."

Energy policy was on most people's minds. After giving his "crisis of confidence" speech in July 1979, Carter had been able to enact a comprehensive energy plan so that by 1980 Americans were consuming less gasoline and were importing 1.5 million fewer barrels of oil than they had in 1977.

But the mood of the country in 1979 was still angry, and long lines at gas stations sometimes resulted in incidents of violence. Carter's approval rating had dropped to 31 percent — equal to that of President Nixon at the height of the Watergate scandal. By 1980, the American economy fell into a recession, making it a challenge for Carter to brag about domestic-policy achievements.

Carter had more success on foreign policy, at least initially. He became president with the goal to make human rights central to U.S. foreign policy. To this end, his administration ended military aid or economic aid to dictatorships in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, and Uganda.

He could also claim some success with regard to relations with the world's other superpower, the Soviet Union (aka USSR). Carter criticized human rights violations by the USSR but maintained a policy of détente, or an easing of tensions. In 1979, the U.S. and the USSR signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) II treaty that limited both nations' manufacture of long-range nuclear weapons.

In 1980, however, the USSR invaded Afghanistan, prompting Carter to take a harder stance against the U.S.'s communist rival. He announced that the U.S. would boycott the 1980 summer Olympic Games in Moscow, the capital of the USSR. But polls revealed that Americans viewed the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as evidence that Carter was weak.

Reagan's economic agenda became central to his message. He proposed expanding deregulation, freezing all federal hiring, ending what he thought was wasteful spending in the government, and cutting taxes

on corporations. His plan also proposed to cut personal tax rates by 10 percent. Despite his focus on cutting deficit spending, Reagan also promised to strengthen Social Security for senior citizens.

Perhaps most importantly, Reagan sought to contrast himself with Carter on foreign policy. He supported Carter's recent harder stance against the Soviet Union. But Reagan argued that he would have been tougher against the USSR all along, and he supported greatly increasing military spending.

In April 1980, a failed attempt to rescue the hostages in Tehran that Carter had ordered resulted in the deaths of eight American military personnel. Perceptions that Carter was ineffective only grew stronger as November 1980 Election Day approached.

## The General Election Campaign

Reagan entered the general election with a strong lead over Carter in the polls. Reagan presented himself as the cure for the economic recession that he squarely blamed on Carter. He said, "Recession is when your neighbor loses his job; depression is when you lose yours; and recovery is when Jimmy Carter loses his."

But a couple of campaign decisions proved highly controversial for the former California governor. Reagan gave a speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi, reaffirming states' rights in an area where three civil-rights workers had been murdered in 1964 opposing that state's official support for racial segregation.

And in a speech in the Bronx, New York, he called the Vietnam War a "noble cause" and said that both creationism and Darwinian evolution should be taught side-by-side in public schools. This speech and his Mississippi speech bolstered Carter's campaign strategy to portray Reagan as "extremely dangerous."

On October 28, one week before Election Day, Carter and Reagan squared off in their first and only televised debate against each other without the independent John Anderson. Carter emphasized his own record and experience. But when he turned to criticize Reagan for opposing the passage of the Medicare program, Reagan famously responded, "There you go again." Observers noted the moment made Reagan appear confident.

Reagan delivered an equally famous though more solemn line at the end of the debate. He addressed the American people generally and asked, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" In the midst of a recession and with recent memories of gasoline shortages in their minds, Reagan's question would prove highly effective. And with the Iranian hostage crisis unresolved, Reagan's question implicitly cast doubt on Carter's competence.

## Landslide Victories

On Election Day, the contest was a landslide for Reagan. He beat Carter by over eight million popular votes. Moreover, Reagan won 44 states, beating Carter in the Electoral College with 489 votes to Carter's mere 49.



Ronald Reagan campaigning in Indiana for the presidency in 1980.

Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum

What led to the landslide? Certainly, events and circumstances all worked against Carter: the poor economy and unchecked inflation of the times; concerns over the U.S.'s global standing and responsibilities; and perennial debates about the role and size of government.

An additional major contributing factor to Reagan's win likely was the rise of the religious right. The 1970s saw a surge of evangelical Christianity in the political sphere. Jimmy Carter himself was an evangelical Christian and campaigned successfully on that fact in 1976. But in 1980, two-thirds of white voters who identified as evangelical Christian voted for Reagan.

Many Democrats in Midwestern states like Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin (aka the Rust Belt) were hardest hit by the poor economy and shared the social conservatism of the religious right. They voted for Reagan in large numbers. They came to be known as "Reagan Democrats."

The influence of evangelical conservatives has impacted several subsequent presidential elections, including the 2000 and 2004 elections for Republican George W. Bush, who was himself an evangelical Christian. And in 2016, Donald Trump won the votes of 80 percent of white evangelical voters — surpassing even Ronald Reagan's appeal.

The year 1980 was a watershed year for the Republican Party that sought to move past the country's memory of Nixon's humiliating resignation only six years prior. The Republicans picked up 53 seats in the House and 12 in the Senate in 1980. And in 1984 Reagan would beat Carter's former vice president Walter Mondale with an even greater landslide: 49 states went for Reagan that year.

In Reagan's November 3, 1980, Election Eve speech, he called the United States a "shining city on a hill." It was a reference to a phrase used by the Puritan John Winthrop of Plymouth Bay Colony — evoking pride in what Reagan believed America to be and perhaps a subtle nod to evangelicals. It was also the kind of positive image of the nation that many Americans seemed to want. ▶

## WRITING & DISCUSSION

1. Explain the differences between the policies of President Carter and his challenger Ronald Reagan in 1980. Use evidence from the article.
2. Do you think it was right for Sen. Ted Kennedy to stay in the Democratic primary race even into the Democratic National Convention in 1980? Why or why not? Do you think it was right for John Anderson to run as an independent candidate? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Reagan's question "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" was so effective in helping him win the 1980 election? Use evidence from the article.

## ACTIVITY: Two Visions of Governance

1. Read the excerpts from speeches of Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, respectively.
2. With a partner, discuss and answer the questions following the excerpts.
3. Using information from the article and from your discussion with your partner, write a short essay of three paragraphs responding to the following prompt: *Compare and contrast the visions of governance for the United States of Reagan and Carter in 1980. Which one do you agree with more and why?*



Never before in our history have Americans been called upon to face three grave threats to our very existence, any one of which could destroy us. We face a disintegrating economy, a weakened defense and an energy policy based on the sharing of scarcity.

The major issue of this campaign is the direct political, personal and moral responsibility of Democratic Party leadership – in the White House and in Congress – for this unprecedented calamity which has befallen us. . . .

. . .

We need rebirth of the American tradition of leadership at every level of government and in private life as well. . . . But, back in 1976, Mr. Carter said, "Trust me." And a lot of people did. Now, many of those people are out of work. Many have seen their savings eaten away by inflation. Many others on fixed incomes, especially the elderly, have watched helplessly as the cruel tax of inflation wasted away their purchasing power. And, today, a great many who trusted Mr. Carter wonder if we can survive the Carter policies of national defense.

"Trust me" government asks that we concentrate our hopes and dreams on one man; that we trust him to do what's best for us. My view of government places trust not in one person or one party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The trust is where it belongs – in the people. . . . That kind of relationship, between the people and their elected leaders, is a special kind of compact.

– Ronald Reagan,  
Republican National Convention, July 17, 1980



During the last Presidential campaign, I crisscrossed this country and I listened to thousands and thousands of people – housewives and farmers, teachers and small business leaders, workers and students, the elderly and the poor, people of every race and every background and every walk of life. It was a powerful experience – a total immersion in the human reality of America.

And I have now had another kind of total immersion – being President of the United States of America. Let me talk for a moment about what that job is like and what I've learned from it.

I've learned that only the most complex and difficult task comes before me in the Oval Office. No easy answers are found there, because no easy questions come there.

. . .

And I have learned that the Presidency is a place of compassion. My own heart is burdened for the troubled Americans. The poor and the jobless and the afflicted – they've become part of me. My thoughts and my prayers for our hostages in Iran are as though they were my own sons and daughters.

The life of every human being on Earth can depend on the experience and judgment and vigilance of the person in the Oval Office. The president's power for building and his power for destruction are awesome. And the power's greatest exactly where the stakes are highest – in matters of war and peace.

– President Jimmy Carter,  
Democratic National Convention, August 14, 1980

## Questions

1. What did each candidate think was the most important issue facing the United States?
2. What qualities did each candidate seem to think was most important for a president to have?
3. Which candidate seemed to talk more about issues that you think are important today?

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### Leave or Remain: Brexit in the UK

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## Standards Addressed

### The U.S. Election of 1980

National U.S. History Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States. **High School (3):** Understands how the rise of religious groups and movements influenced political issues in contemporary American society (e.g., the position of major religious groups on such issues as abortion, gay rights, women in the clergy, and educational issues; the causes and significance of religious evangelism and its effect on American political and religious culture in the 1980s; how Supreme Court decisions since 1968 have affected the meaning and practice of religious freedom).

**California State HSS Standard 11.11:** Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society. (2) Discuss the significant domestic policy speeches of . . . Carter, Reagan . . . .

**California HSS Framework (2016), Chapter 16:** “Students begin their studies of contemporary America by surveying American presidents who served during these decades. Presidents Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan . . . . This information will help students address the question *How has the role of the federal government (and especially the presidency) changed from the 1970s through more recent times?* (p.426).

**California HSS Framework (2016), Chapter 16:** “In 1980, Ronald Reagan won the presidency and forged a new Republican Party by uniting fiscal and social conservatives with a landslide victory. . . .” (p. 427).

**Common Core State Standards:** SL 11-12.1, SL 11-12.3, RH 11-12.1, RH 11-12.2, RH 11-12.3, RH 11-12.4, RH 11-12.10, WHST 11-12.1, WHST 11-12.2, WHST 11-12.9, WHST 11-12.10

### South Africa: Confronting the Country’s Apartheid Past

National World History Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability, and peace in an interdependent world. **Middle School (3):** Understands efforts to improve political and social conditions around the world (e.g., . . . how the apartheid system was dismantled in South Africa and the black majority won voting rights . . .). **High School (5):** Understands the role of political ideology, religion, and ethnicity in shaping modern governments (e.g., . . . how successful democratic reform movements have been in challenging authoritarian governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; the implications of ethnic, religious, and border conflicts on state-building in the newly independent republics of Africa . . .).

**California State HSS Standard 12.9:** Students analyze the origins, characteristics, and development of different political systems across time, with emphasis on the quest for political democracy, its advances, and its obstacles. (8) Identify the successes of relatively new democracies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the ideas, leaders, and general societal conditions that have launched and sustained, or failed to sustain, them.

**California HSS Framework (2016), Chapter 15:** “Several stable republics exist, however, including Botswana, Ghana, Morocco, and South Africa, where apartheid gave way to multiparty democracy in the 1990s, though these countries continue to be challenged by an unequal distribution of wealth, corruption, and one-party rule” (p. 361).

**California HSS Framework (2016), Chapter 17:** “Attention also should be given to historical and contemporary movements that overthrew tyrannical governments and/or movements toward democratic government in countries such as . . . South Africa . . . .” (p.453).

**Common Core State Standards:** SL 6-8/9-10/11-12.1, SL 6-8/9-10/11-12.2, SL 6-8/9-10/11-12.3, RH 6-8/9-10/11-12.1, RH 6-8/9-10/11-12.2, RH 6-8/9-10/11-12.3, RH 6-8/9-10/11-12.10, WHST 6-8/9-10/11-12.1, WHST 6-8/9-10/11-12.2, WHST 6-8/9-10/11-12.9, WHST 6-8/9-10.10/11-12

### Leave or Remain: Brexit in the UK

National World History Standard 44: Understands the search for community, stability, and peace in an interdependent world. **Middle School (2):** Understands the impact of increasing economic interdependence in different regions of the world (e.g., . . . the effects of the European Economic Community and its growth on economic productivity and political integration in Europe . . .).

National World History Standard 45: Understands major global trends since World War II. **High School (3):** Understands connections between globalizing trends in economy, technology, and culture and dynamic assertions of traditional cultural identity and distinctiveness. **Knowledge/skill statement 1:** Knows globalizing trends in economy.

**California HSS Framework (2016), Chapter 15:** “World War II accelerated the trend of globalization, the freer and faster movement of people, ideas, capital, and resources across borders. The question *How has globalization affected people, nations, and capital?* can guide students’ investigation . . . .” (p. 365). “[T]he major west European countries created among themselves a novel confederal apparatus—the European Union—to integrate their economies and to provide a modicum of political unity. . . .” (p. 373).

**California HSS Standard 11.2:** Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, largescale rural-to-urban migration, and massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. (8) Examine the effect of political programs and activities of Populists.

**California HSS Standard 11.6:** Students analyze the different explanations for the Great Depression and how the New Deal fundamentally changed the role of the federal government.

**Common Core State Standards:** SL 6-8/11-12.1, SL 6-8/11-12.3, RH 6-8/11-12.1, RH 6-8/11-12.2, RH 6-8/11-12.3, RH 6-8/11-12.4, RH 6-8/11-12.10, WHST 6-8/11-12.1, WHST 6-8/11-12.2, WHST 6-8/11-12.9, WHST 6-8/11-12.10

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