1868

Ulysses S. Grant vs Horatio Seymour

A 75-minute lesson on the 1868 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Reconstruction	ELECTORAL VOTES 294 total
WINNER Ulysses S. Grant (Republican) · 214 EV	RUNNER-UP Horatio Seymour (Democratic) · 80 EV
KEY ISSUE Reconstruction policy; Black suffrage; wartime debt repayment	TURNOUT 80.9%

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

1868: Ulysses S. Grant vs Horatio Seymour

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 1868 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1868 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1868 that would produce a Republican landslide. For each, identify the specific 1865-1868 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1868 election was the 21st U.S. presidential election. It was the first U.S. presidential election after the Civil War; the first in which Black Americans in the South could legally vote; and the first to test whether the constitutional changes of Reconstruction could be sustained politically. The election produced Ulysses S. Grant's decisive victory and confirmed Republican control of Reconstruction for another four years. Its structural significance was the demonstration that multiracial democracy was politically possible in the United States - a demonstration that would be progressively dismantled between 1877 and 1965. The political environment was dominated by Reconstruction. After Lincoln's April 1865 assassination, Vice President Andrew Johnson - a War Democrat from Tennessee - had become the 17th president. Johnson and the Radical Republican congressional majority had fundamentally conflicting visions of Reconstruction. Johnson favored lenient terms (full restoration of state rights, no federal protection of Black civil rights). Radicals favored strict terms (federal protection of Black civil rights, military occupation, exclusion of former Confederate officials from political power). The conflict produced: the 1865 Black Codes (Southern legislatures restricting Black labor mobility and civil rights); the 1866 Civil Rights Act (passed over Johnson's veto); the Fourteenth Amendment (ratified July 9, 1868 - birthright citizenship, equal protection, congressional representation tied to voting rights); the 1867 Reconstruction Acts (placing the South under military rule); the 1867 Tenure of Office Act (limiting Johnson's ability to fire Cabinet officials); and Johnson's February 1868 impeachment. The Senate trial ended May 16, 1868 with Johnson acquitted by 35-19 (the Senate needed 36 votes for two-thirds removal - one short, provided by Senator Edmund Ross of Kansas).

The Republican Party - dominated by Radicals after the Johnson impeachment - met in Chicago on May 20-21, 1868. The convention nominated Ulysses S. Grant unanimously on the first ballot. Grant was 46 years old, the Union army's top general during the Civil War, and the most popular American since Washington. He had accepted Robert E. Lee's April 9, 1865 surrender at Appomattox Court House. He had been Johnson's Secretary of War briefly (August 1867 - February 1868) before resigning over the Tenure of Office Act dispute - a resignation that politically validated Radical Republican opposition to Johnson. Schuyler Colfax of Indiana (Speaker of the House) was the vice presidential candidate. The Republican platform supported federal protection of Black civil rights, continued Reconstruction, gradual debt reduction, and amnesty for most former Confederates.

The Democratic Party met in New York City on July 4-9, 1868. The convention deadlocked through 21 ballots between Senator George H. Pendleton of Ohio (a Peace Democrat), Senator Thomas A. Hendricks of Indiana, former Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase (who had been a Radical Republican but had broken with the party over Reconstruction policy), and President Andrew Johnson himself. On the 22nd ballot the convention nominated former Governor Horatio Seymour of New York - a Peace Democrat who had opposed Lincoln during the Civil War. Seymour was politically tainted by his association with Copperhead sentiment (during the 1863 Draft Riots in New York City, then-Governor Seymour had addressed the rioters as "my friends"). Frank Blair Jr. of Missouri was the vice presidential candidate; Blair publicly declared his opposition to Reconstruction in inflammatory terms - his June 1868 "Brodhead letter" advocated Black disenfranchisement and military reversal of Reconstruction state governments. The Democratic platform attacked Reconstruction as "unconstitutional, revolutionary, and void."

The 1868 election was politically transformative for several reasons. (1) The 1867 Reconstruction Acts had required Southern states to allow Black male voters as a condition of readmission to the Union. Seven of the eleven former Confederate states had been readmitted under Reconstruction governments by November 1868: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee. Black voters in these states cast hundreds of thousands of votes - the first significant Black voting in U.S. history. (2) Black voters supported Grant overwhelmingly (around 90% based on contemporary estimates). (3) Three former Confederate states - Mississippi, Texas, Virginia - had not yet been readmitted and did not vote in 1868. (4) The Ku Klux Klan, founded in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1865-1866 by former Confederate soldiers, conducted violent suppression of Black voters in parts of Georgia and Louisiana - reducing Black turnout in those states. The Klan operated in many counties as a paramilitary wing of the Democratic Party.

Grant won 214 electoral votes to Seymour's 80. Grant carried 26 of 34 voting states; Seymour carried 8. The popular vote was 3,013,650 (52.7%) to 2,708,744 (47.3%) - much closer than the electoral margin suggests. Grant's margin in the popular vote (305,000) was smaller than the estimated Black vote (around 700,000) in his column

		- meaning that without Black voters, Seymour might have won the popular vote. Grant was inaugurated March 4, 1869. His First Inaugural Address explicitly endorsed the Fifteenth Amendment (then in the ratification process) and committed to federal enforcement of the Reconstruction Amendments. His two terms would deliver: the February 3, 1870 ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment (prohibiting race-based denial of voting rights); the May 1870 Enforcement Act and 1871 Ku Klux Klan Act (federal prosecution of Klan violence; 5,000 indictments and over 600 convictions in 1871-72); the May 1872 Amnesty Act (restoring political rights to most former Confederate officials); the 1872 re-election (286-66 over Horace Greeley); but also major corruption scandals (Credit Mobilier 1872-73, Whiskey Ring 1875, Indian Ring 1876) that damaged the Republican Party. The September 1873 Panic produced a deep depression. The 1877 Compromise would effectively end Reconstruction under Grant's successor Rutherford B. Hayes - withdrawing federal troops from the South in exchange for the disputed 1876 election result. 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 1868 election tells you about the Reconstruction 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

Reconstruction

The 1865-1877 period when the federal government tried to rebuild the South after the Civil War and protect the rights of newly freed Black Americans. Ended with the 1877 Compromise that withdrew federal troops from the South.

Fifteenth Amendment

Ratified February 3, 1870. Prohibited federal or state denial of voting rights based on race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The third of the three Reconstruction Amendments.

Tenure of Office Act

The 1867 federal law (passed over Johnson's veto) limiting the president's ability to fire Cabinet officials without Senate consent. Johnson's violation of the Act in firing Secretary of War Edwin Stanton was the basis for his February 1868 impeachment. Repealed in 1887.

Enforcement Acts of 1870-71

Three federal laws strengthening federal protection of Black voting rights against private violence. The 1871 Ku Klux Klan Act was the third and most important. Authorized federal prosecution of state officials and private citizens who suppressed civil rights.

Fourteenth Amendment

Ratified July 9, 1868. Established birthright citizenship; required equal protection of the laws; reduced congressional representation for states denying voting rights; prohibited federal/state public officeholding by former Confederate officials. The constitutional foundation of modern American civil rights law.

Reconstruction Acts of 1867

The federal laws that placed the former Confederacy under military rule and required Southern states to ratify the 14th Amendment, allow Black male voters, and adopt new state constitutions as conditions of readmission to the Union.

Ku Klux Klan

A violent white-supremacist organization founded in Pulaski, Tennessee in 1865-1866 by former Confederate soldiers. The Klan attacked Black Americans, white Republicans, and federal officials in the South during Reconstruction. The 1871 federal Ku Klux Klan Act produced 5,000 indictments and over 600 convictions; the Klan effectively dissolved by 1873.

First Inaugural Address

ULYSSES S. GRANT, MARCH 4, 1869

Grant took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1869, two months after Andrew Johnson's troubled term ended. Johnson did not attend the inauguration. Grant's address was strikingly brief - 1,128 words. He explicitly endorsed the 15th Amendment (then in the ratification process) and supported continued federal protection of Black civil rights. The "no policy other than that which is the policy of the people" framing positioned Grant as a constitutional servant rather than a Radical Republican partisan - while still committing to substantive Reconstruction enforcement.

> *"The country having just emerged from a great rebellion, many questions will come before it for settlement in the next four years which preceding Administrations have never had to deal with. In meeting these it is desirable that they should be approached calmly, without prejudice, hate, or sectional pride, remembering that the greatest good to the greatest number is the object to be attained. This requires security of person, property, and free religious and political opinion in every part of our common country, without regard to local prejudice. All laws to secure these ends will receive my best efforts for their enforcement."*

Grant, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1869). Public domain.

The 1868 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 Ulysses S. Grant win in 1868?

( ) A. 189
( ) B. 203
( ) C. 214
( ) D. 247

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

On which ballot did the 1868 Democratic Convention nominate Horatio Seymour?

( ) A. 12th
( ) B. 17th
( ) C. 22nd
( ) D. 36th

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Reconstruction Acts of 1867 transform Southern politics before the 1868 election? Identify three specific provisions.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Grant's 305,000-vote popular margin politically significant despite the 214-80 electoral landslide?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Grant says in his inaugural that all laws securing "security of person, property, and free religious and political opinion" will "receive my best efforts for their enforcement." Identify two specific 1870-1872 statutes that operationalized this commitment.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Andrew Johnson's February 1868 impeachment trial end in acquittal by exactly one Senate vote, and what was the political significance of the close vote?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1868 election map, identify the 8 states Seymour carried. What pattern emerges, and what does it tell you about Democratic political strength in 1868?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

214. Grant 214; Seymour 80. Grant carried 26 of 34 voting states.

Three former Confederate states (Mississippi, Texas, Virginia) had not been readmitted and did not vote.

QUESTION 2

22nd. The Democratic Convention deadlocked through 21 ballots before nominating Seymour on the 22nd. The pattern reflected Democratic Party divisions.

The 22-ballot nomination demonstrates Democratic Party factionalism in the immediate post-war period.

QUESTION 3

The 1867 Reconstruction Acts: (1) placed the former Confederacy under military rule, dividing it into five military districts. (2) required Southern states to ratify the 14th Amendment as a condition of readmission. (3) required Southern states to allow Black male voters and to adopt new state constitutions with universal manhood suffrage. (4) excluded former Confederate officials from political participation. (5) required ratification conventions and elections under federal military supervision. The Acts enfranchised approximately 700,000 Black voters and disenfranchised approximately 100,000 former Confederate officials. By November 1868, seven Southern states had been readmitted under Reconstruction governments.

AP students should be able to identify multiple specific Reconstruction Act provisions.

QUESTION 4

The 305,000-vote popular margin was much smaller than the estimated Black vote of 700,000 in Grant's column. Without Black voters in the recently readmitted Southern states, Seymour might have won the popular vote. The political significance: (1) Black voter participation was structurally decisive for the popular-vote outcome - the first time in U.S. history a non-white voting bloc was electorally consequential. (2) The narrow popular-vote margin demonstrated that Northern white voters were not uniformly committed to Reconstruction - support depended heavily on continued military enforcement. (3) The structural fragility was visible: when Reconstruction ended in 1877, Black voters would be systematically disenfranchised, and the political settlement of 1868 would not be sustainable.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance and fragility of Black voting in 1868.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: (1) The First Enforcement Act (May 1870) - prohibited state officials from racial discrimination in voting registration. (2) The Second Enforcement Act (February 1871) - federalized supervision of congressional elections, allowing federal marshals to oversee elections in urban areas. (3) The Ku Klux Klan Act / Third Enforcement Act (April 1871) - authorized federal prosecution of private citizens who deprived others of civil rights; suspended habeas corpus in counties under Klan terrorism; produced 5,000 indictments and over 600 convictions in 1871-72. (4) The 1875 Civil Rights Act - prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations (struck down by the Supreme Court in 1883). The 1871 Ku Klux Klan Act is the strongest single operationalization.

AP students should be able to identify the specific enforcement statutes.

QUESTION 6

The Senate trial ended May 16, 1868 with the vote 35-19 - one short of the 36 votes needed for two-thirds removal. Seven Republican senators voted for acquittal: Trumbull, Fessenden, Henderson, Grimes, Ross, Fowler, Van Winkle. The most famous "switching" vote was Edmund Ross of Kansas, who had been expected to vote for conviction but voted to acquit. The political significance: (1) The close vote demonstrated that even within the Radical Republican coalition, there was meaningful concern about the precedent of removing a president for political reasons. (2) Johnson's survival meant he served out his term and was succeeded by Grant via election rather than constitutional succession. (3) The Republican strategy then shifted from impeachment-based opposition to electoral consolidation through the 1868 election. (4) No president would be impeached again until Bill Clinton in 1998.

AP students should be able to articulate the close-vote politics and the consequences for Republican strategy.

QUESTION 7

Seymour states: Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Oregon. Pattern: New England commercial centers (Connecticut, New Jersey, New York City), Border States (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland), upper-South Reconstruction states with active Klan suppression of Black voters (Georgia, Louisiana), and one Pacific state (Oregon). The pattern reveals: (1) Democrats retained significant urban-Northeast strength; (2) Border States favored Democrats; (3) Reconstruction-state results were structurally affected by Klan violence. The structural significance: even with Reconstruction in place, Democrats retained competitive footing in significant parts of the country - which is why the 1877 Compromise's end of Reconstruction would produce a long-term Democratic recovery.

AP students should be able to read the 1868 map as evidence of Democratic Party residual strength.

Discussion prompts

1. Grant's popular margin of 305,000 was smaller than the estimated Black vote of 700,000 in his column. Identify two reasons Black voter participation was structurally decisive for the 1868 result, and explain why Reconstruction-era Black voting did not survive past 1877.

2 Andrew Johnson was the only U.S. president impeached before 1998. Identify three specific 1865-1868 Johnson administration actions that produced his February 1868 impeachment, and explain how his survival by one Senate vote affected Republican political strategy.