1872

Ulysses S. Grant vs Horace Greeley

A 50-minute lesson on the 1872 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Reconstruction	ELECTORAL VOTES 352 total
WINNER Ulysses S. Grant (Republican) · 286 EV	RUNNER-UP Horace Greeley (Liberal Republican) · 0 EV
KEY ISSUE Corruption reform; Reconstruction continuation; Liberal Republican revolt	TURNOUT 72.1%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1872: Ulysses S. Grant vs Horace Greeley

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two political conditions in 1872 that would make a fusion ticket between two opposing parties seem strategically necessary. For each, identify the specific 1869-1872 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1872 election was the 22nd U.S. presidential election. It produced Ulysses S. Grant's decisive re-election landslide and demonstrated that Northern Republican commitment to Reconstruction was eroding. It also produced the only U.S. presidential election in which a major-party candidate died between Election Day and the Electoral College meeting. The political environment was complicated. President Grant had governed for four years (1869-1873). His administration had passed the 15th Amendment (February 1870), the Enforcement Acts (1870-71), the Ku Klux Klan Act (April 1871), and the May 1872 Amnesty Act (restoring political rights to most former Confederate officials). The federal prosecution of the Klan had produced 5,000 indictments and over 600 convictions in 1871-72. But the administration had also produced major corruption scandals. The Credit Mobilier scandal - exposed by the New York Sun in September 1872 - revealed that Vice President Schuyler Colfax and other Republicans had received Credit Mobilier stock in exchange for political favors to the Union Pacific Railroad. The Liberal Republican Party emerged in 1872 from Republicans dissatisfied with Grant administration corruption and continued Reconstruction enforcement. The May 1-3, 1872 Liberal Republican Convention in Cincinnati nominated Horace Greeley, 61, the editor of the New York Tribune for 30 years. Greeley was an eccentric but nationally famous figure: he had championed antislavery, women's suffrage, the Homestead Act, public education, vegetarianism, and many other causes. He had also famously opposed the Civil War initially before becoming a pro-war voice. Benjamin Gratz Brown of Missouri was the vice presidential candidate. The Democratic Party - which had not won a presidential election since 1856 - made a strategic decision at its July 9-10, 1872 Baltimore convention. Rather than nominate its own candidate, the party endorsed Greeley and Brown. The fusion ticket was politically unusual: Greeley had spent his career as an editor attacking

the Democratic Party. But Democratic leaders calculated that fusion was their only chance to defeat Grant. The fusion strategy required Democrats to vote for a candidate who had opposed slavery, supported Reconstruction (initially), and championed Northern free-labor ideology - everything the Democratic Party had stood against for two decades. The strategy revealed how desperate the Democratic Party was for a path back to national competitiveness.

The Republican Party renominated Grant at its June 5-6, 1872 Philadelphia convention. Henry Wilson of Massachusetts replaced Vice President Schuyler Colfax (who was politically tainted by Credit Mobilier) on the ticket. The Republican platform endorsed civil-service reform, gradual debt reduction, continued Reconstruction, and a high tariff.

The campaign focused on three issues. (1) Grant administration corruption (Liberal Republicans and Democrats attacked it; Republicans claimed the scandals were exaggerated). (2) Reconstruction policy (Liberal Republicans and Democrats wanted to end Reconstruction; Republicans wanted to continue it). (3) Greeley's eccentricities (Republican cartoons by Thomas Nast in Harper's Weekly mocked Greeley relentlessly, with Nast's cartoons reaching mass audiences and shaping public opinion about Greeley as politically unreliable). The Republican strategy: position Grant as a stable wartime leader; position Greeley as an erratic intellectual who would betray Reconstruction.

Grant won 286 electoral votes to Greeley's 66. Grant carried 31 of 37 states; Greeley carried 6 (Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas). The popular vote was 3,597,132 (55.6%) to 2,834,125 (43.8%) - a much larger margin than 1868. Grant's 1872 result was the second-largest popular-vote margin of any Republican presidential candidate until Nixon in 1972.

Horace Greeley died on November 29, 1872 - 24 days after the November 5 popular vote. His wife had died on October 30, 1872; his New York Tribune had been politically attacked through the campaign and he had been pushed out of editorial control; he had lost the election decisively. The combined personal and political pressures contributed to his collapse and death from "brain fever" (probably encephalitis or stroke). He is the only major-party presidential candidate to die between Election Day and the Electoral College vote.

When the Electoral College met December 4, 1872, Greeley's 66 popular-vote electors had no legal candidate to vote for. They scattered their votes: 42 to Thomas A. Hendricks of Indiana, 18 to Benjamin Gratz Brown (Greeley's running mate), 2 to Charles Jenkins of Georgia, 1 to David Davis of Illinois, and 3 to Greeley himself. The 3 votes for the dead Greeley were not counted by Congress because the candidate was dead. Grant was easily confirmed as president-elect.

Grant's second term (1873-1877) was difficult. The September 18, 1873 Panic -

		triggered by the failure of Jay Cooke & Company - produced a deep depression that lasted until 1879. The Whiskey Ring scandal in 1875 (federal officials and distillers conspiring to evade liquor taxes), the Indian Ring scandal in 1876 (Secretary of War William W. Belknap accepting bribes from Indian Affairs contractors), and continued Reconstruction violence damaged Republican standing. The 1876 election - between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel J. Tilden - was disputed for months and eventually resolved by the 1877 Compromise that ended Reconstruction.
10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

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

Liberal Republican Party

The 1872 third party formed by Republicans dissatisfied with Grant administration corruption and continued Reconstruction enforcement. Nominated Horace Greeley. Also endorsed by the Democratic Party. Demonstrated that Northern Republican commitment to Reconstruction was eroding.

Horace Greeley

The editor of the New York Tribune for 30 years. Liberal Republican and Democratic nominee in 1872. Died November 29, 1872 - 24 days after Election Day. The only major-party presidential candidate to die between Election Day and the Electoral College vote.

Panic of 1873

The major financial crisis that began September 18, 1873 with the failure of Jay Cooke & Company. Produced a deep depression that lasted until 1879. The longest U.S. economic contraction until the Great Depression.

Credit Mobilier scandal

The 1872 scandal revealing that Vice President Schuyler Colfax and other Republicans had received Credit Mobilier stock in exchange for political favors to the Union Pacific Railroad. Exposed by the New York Sun in September 1872.

Amnesty Act of 1872

The May 1872 federal law restoring political rights to most former Confederate officials. About 500 prominent Confederate leaders were excluded; the rest could now hold public office. Signaled the gradual federal retreat from Reconstruction enforcement.

Whiskey Ring

The 1875 scandal in which federal officials and distillers conspired to evade liquor taxes. Hundreds of indictments; many convictions; reached high into the Grant administration (Grant's personal secretary Orville Babcock was indicted but acquitted with Grant's personal assistance).

Second Inaugural Address

ULYSSES S. GRANT, MARCH 4, 1873

Grant took the oath for his second term at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1873. The address was 1,341 words. Grant addressed the corruption charges directly and defended his administration's civil-service reform efforts. The address also explicitly endorsed continued Reconstruction enforcement. The "let us have peace" framing reflected Grant's 1868 campaign slogan but acknowledged that peace required active federal protection of civil rights.

> *"Under the Providence of God I shall give my support to such measures as will tend to the rapid pacification of the country and the protection of the rights of all our citizens in every section. I have endeavored to find a course of policy which would lead to the best results, and I believe the principles of action which I have observed are sound. They have not always been such as suited the popular wishes of the moment, but they have always been such as I believed to be the best for the great body of the people. I have been the subject of abuse and slander scarcely ever equaled in political history, which to-day I feel that I can afford to disregard in view of your verdict, which I gratefully accept as my vindication."*

Grant, "Second Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1873). Public domain.

The 1872 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Ulysses S. Grant win in 1872?

( ) A. 247
( ) B. 286
( ) C. 305
( ) D. 331

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1872 scandal revealed that Vice President Schuyler Colfax had received railroad stock in exchange for political favors?

( ) A. Whiskey Ring
( ) B. Credit Mobilier
( ) C. Indian Ring
( ) D. Salary Grab

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Democratic Party endorse Horace Greeley - a former Whig and Republican - in 1872?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What happened to Horace Greeley's electoral votes after his November 29, 1872 death?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Grant says in his Second Inaugural that he has "been the subject of abuse and slander scarcely ever equaled in political history." What political situation was he addressing?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1872 election map, identify the 6 states Greeley carried. What pattern emerges, and what does it tell you about the Democratic-Liberal Republican coalition?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

286. Grant 286; Greeley 66 popular vote (scattered after Greeley's death). Grant carried 31 of 37 states.

Grant's 1872 result was the largest popular-vote margin of any Republican presidential candidate until Nixon in 1972.

QUESTION 2

Credit Mobilier. The 1872 scandal revealed that Vice President Schuyler Colfax and other Republicans had received Credit Mobilier stock in exchange for political favors to the Union Pacific Railroad. Exposed by the New York Sun in September 1872.

AP students should know the Credit Mobilier scandal as the founding railroad-corruption scandal in U.S. politics.

QUESTION 3

The Democratic Party had not won a presidential election since 1856. Rather than nominate its own candidate at its July 1872 Baltimore convention, the party endorsed Greeley - the Liberal Republican candidate. The fusion strategy reasons: (1) Democrats lacked any nationally competitive candidate of their own; (2) Greeley plus Democrats could potentially defeat Grant if the anti-Grant vote could be unified; (3) Republicans dissatisfied with Grant might cross over more easily to a non-Democratic candidate; (4) the Democratic Party's Southern strength plus the Liberal Republican's Northern reformist appeal might produce a winning coalition. The strategy failed because: (1) Greeley's eccentricity was effectively mocked by Republican cartoonists; (2) the fusion was incoherent (Democrats had to accept a candidate who had opposed everything they stood for); (3) Grant's wartime reputation remained strong; (4) the Credit Mobilier scandal's political damage was less than Liberal Republicans hoped.

AP students should be able to articulate both the strategic logic and the failure modes of the fusion ticket.

QUESTION 4

When the Electoral College met December 4, 1872, Greeley's 66 popular-vote electors had no legal candidate to vote for. They scattered their votes: 42 to Thomas A. Hendricks of Indiana, 18 to Benjamin Gratz Brown (Greeley's running mate), 2 to Charles Jenkins of Georgia, 1 to David Davis of Illinois, and 3 to Greeley himself. The 3 votes for the dead Greeley were not counted by Congress because the candidate was dead. Grant was easily confirmed as president-elect.

The scattering of Greeley's votes is a unique constitutional moment in U.S. history.

QUESTION 5

Grant was addressing the political attacks on his administration during the 1872 campaign. The Credit Mobilier scandal had been exposed in September 1872, just two months before the election. Liberal Republicans and Democrats had attacked Grant's administration as corrupt. Republican press had defended him. The 286-66 landslide was Grant's political vindication. His framing - "I can afford to disregard" the abuse "in view of your verdict, which I gratefully accept as my vindication" - positioned the electoral landslide as moral evidence that the corruption charges were overblown. The strategic function was to delegitimize ongoing investigations and shift the political conversation away from scandal toward governance.

AP students should be able to identify Grant's framing as a strategic political response to corruption charges.

QUESTION 6

Greeley states: Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas. Pattern: Five border states or Southern states (Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas) - all states with significant Democratic strength and active resistance to Reconstruction. The pattern reveals the Democratic-Liberal Republican coalition's ceiling: it could mobilize anti-Reconstruction sentiment in border and upper-South states but could not penetrate the Northern Republican base. The Liberal Republican defection from the GOP was numerically too small to flip the Northern electoral vote even when combined with Democratic strength.

AP students should be able to read the 1872 map as evidence of the regional ceiling of anti-Reconstruction politics.