1872

Ulysses S. Grant vs Horace Greeley

A 75-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 + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1872: Ulysses S. Grant vs Horace Greeley

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 1872 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1872 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1872 that would make a fusion ticket between Liberal Republicans and Democrats 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; demonstrated that Northern Republican commitment to Reconstruction was eroding; and produced the only U.S. presidential election in which a major-party candidate died between Election Day and the Electoral College meeting. The election's structural significance was the visible weakening of the Republican Party's Reconstruction coalition - a weakening that would produce the 1877 Compromise and the structural end of Reconstruction enforcement. The political environment was complicated. President Grant had governed for four years (1869-1873). His administration had passed the 15th Amendment (February 3, 1870), the Enforcement Acts (May 1870, February 1871), the Ku Klux Klan Act (April 20, 1871), and the May 22, 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 (just two months before Election Day) - revealed that Vice President Schuyler Colfax, Representative James A. Garfield, 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. 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. (2) Reconstruction policy (Liberal Republicans and Democrats wanted to end Reconstruction; Republicans wanted to continue it). (3) Greeley's eccentricities (Thomas Nast's Harper's Weekly cartoons reached mass audiences and shaped public opinion about Greeley as politically unreliable). The Republican strategy: position Grant as a stable wartime leader; position Greeley as an erratic intellectual.

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) reached high into the Grant administration. The Indian Ring scandal in 1876 (Secretary of War William W. Belknap accepting bribes from Indian Affairs contractors) produced Belknap's resignation just hours before impeachment. The continued Reconstruction violence - particularly the 1873 Colfax massacre in Louisiana (150 Black men killed) and the 1874 Coushatta massacre - damaged Republican standing in the North as Northern voters tired of continued Southern racial conflict. The 1876 election - between Rutherford B. Hayes and Samuel J. Tilden - was disputed for months and eventually resolved by the 1877 Compromise that withdrew federal troops from the South and effectively ended Reconstruction. Historians treat the 1872 election as a structural inflection point. The Liberal Republican defection demonstrated that Northern Republican commitment to Reconstruction was already eroding by 1872. The 1873 Panic accelerated the erosion. The continued scandals damaged Republican credibility. The 1877 Compromise was the structural endpoint of the trajectory the 1872 election had begun. Without the Liberal Republican defection, the post-1872 Republican collapse might have been delayed - but the structural conditions for the end of Reconstruction were already in place. 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 1872 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

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.

Amnesty Act of 1872

The May 22, 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).

Twentieth Amendment

Ratified 1933. Moved the presidential inauguration from March 4 to January 20 and established procedures for what happens if a president-elect dies before the inauguration. Partially addresses the constitutional ambiguities exposed by the 1872 Greeley death.

Credit Mobilier scandal

The 1872 scandal revealing that Vice President Schuyler Colfax, Representative James A. Garfield, 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.

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.

Colfax massacre

The April 13, 1873 massacre of 150 Black men by White League paramilitaries in Colfax, Louisiana. The deadliest single incident of post-Civil-War racial violence. The 1876 United States v. Cruikshank decision overturned federal convictions of the perpetrators - signaling the federal judicial retreat from Reconstruction enforcement.

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 "I have been the subject of abuse and slander" framing positioned the 286-66 landslide as moral vindication.

> *"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 (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 1872?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1872 scandal damaged the Grant administration's credibility just before the election?

( ) 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 who had spent his career attacking Democrats - in 1872?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What happened to Horace Greeley's 66 popular-vote electors 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." Explain the political situation he was addressing and the strategic function of his framing.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific 1873-1876 developments that damaged the Grant administration's political standing during his second term.

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1872 election map, identify the 6 states Greeley carried. What pattern emerges, and what does it tell you about the limits of the Liberal Republican-Democratic 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. Exposed by the New York Sun in September 1872.

AP students should know the Credit Mobilier scandal as the founding railroad-corruption scandal.

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. Strategic 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; (2) the fusion was ideologically incoherent; (3) Grant's wartime reputation remained strong.

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

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 - particularly the Credit Mobilier scandal exposed in September 1872, just two months before the election. The strategic function: (1) the 286-66 landslide was framed as moral vindication of his administration; (2) corruption charges were positioned as partisan attacks that voters had explicitly rejected; (3) the framing was designed to delegitimize ongoing investigations by suggesting that voters had already decided the matter; (4) Grant's "I can afford to disregard" framing positioned future corruption charges as evidence of opposition desperation rather than legitimate concerns. The strategic function failed during Grant's second term as additional scandals (Whiskey Ring 1875, Indian Ring 1876) emerged that the 1872 verdict could not retroactively excuse.

AP students should be able to identify Grant's framing as a strategic response to corruption charges and articulate its eventual failure.

QUESTION 6

Accept any three of: (1) The September 18, 1873 Panic triggered by Jay Cooke & Company's failure - the longest U.S. economic contraction until the Great Depression. (2) The 1873 Colfax massacre (April 13, 1873) of 150 Black men by White League paramilitaries in Louisiana. (3) The 1875 Whiskey Ring scandal reaching high into the Grant administration. (4) The 1876 Indian Ring scandal producing Secretary of War William W. Belknap's resignation hours before impeachment. (5) The 1873 Slaughterhouse Cases narrowing 14th Amendment protections. (6) The 1875 United States v. Cruikshank decision overturning federal convictions of Colfax massacre perpetrators. (7) Continued Reconstruction violence including the 1874 Coushatta massacre and 1875 Vicksburg massacres.

AP students should be able to identify multiple specific 1873-1876 developments damaging Grant.

QUESTION 7

Greeley states: Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas. Pattern: All six are border states or upper-South states with significant Democratic strength and active resistance to Reconstruction. The pattern reveals: (1) the Democratic-Liberal Republican coalition could mobilize anti-Reconstruction sentiment in border and upper-South states; (2) it could not penetrate the Northern Republican base; (3) the Liberal Republican defection from the GOP was numerically too small to flip Northern electoral votes even combined with Democratic strength. The structural lesson: anti-Reconstruction politics in 1872 had a regional ceiling, but the ceiling was rising. By 1876 it would be high enough to produce the disputed election. By 1877 it would produce the end of Reconstruction.

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

Discussion prompts

1 The Liberal Republican defection of 1872 demonstrated that Northern Republican commitment to Reconstruction was eroding only seven years after the Civil War's end. Identify two structural reasons for the erosion and explain whether the defection was contingent on Grant's specific corruption problems or reflected deeper political dynamics.

2 Horace Greeley's November 29, 1872 death between Election Day and the Electoral College meeting exposed constitutional ambiguities about presidential candidate succession. Identify two specific ambiguities and explain whether subsequent constitutional law has resolved them.