3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1880

James A. Garfield vs Winfield Scott Hancock

A 35-minute lesson on the 1880 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Gilded Age	ELECTORAL VOTES 369 total
WINNER James A. Garfield (Republican) · 214 EV	RUNNER-UP Winfield Scott Hancock (Democratic) · 155 EV
KEY ISSUE Civil service reform; Stalwart vs. Half-Breed Republican factions; tariff policy	TURNOUT 80.5%

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2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1880: James A. Garfield vs Winfield Scott Hancock

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a political party is split into competing groups and cannot agree on a leader, they sometimes pick a surprise compromise. Why might a compromise candidate be more likely to win the general election?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1880 election was the 24th U.S. presidential election. It produced James A. Garfield's dark-horse victory and his subsequent assassination by a disappointed office-seeker. The election's structural legacy was the 1883 Pendleton Civil Service Act - the structural endpoint of the Jacksonian spoils system. The Republican Party was bitterly divided. Two factions had emerged during the Grant and Hayes administrations: (1) the Stalwarts, led by Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York, who defended the spoils system and wanted Grant to return for a third term; (2) the Half-Breeds, led by Senator James G. Blaine of Maine, who supported civil-service reform. A third smaller faction - the "Independents" or "Reformers" - was led by Senator George F. Edmunds of Vermont and supported Hayes's civil-service approach. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago from June 2-8, 1880. The convention deadlocked for 35 ballots between Grant (the Stalwart candidate, with 304 votes initially); Blaine (the Half-Breed candidate, with 284 votes); Edmunds (the Independent candidate, with 34 votes); and others. James A. Garfield, 48, an Ohio Republican congressman who had come to the convention to nominate Treasury Secretary John Sherman, gave a powerful speech for Sherman that drew attention to himself. On the 34th ballot, a Wisconsin delegate began voting for Garfield. By the 36th ballot, Garfield had the nomination. Garfield was the second dark-horse Republican nominee after Hayes in 1876. Chester A. Arthur of New York - a Stalwart loyal to Conkling - was selected as the vice presidential candidate to balance the ticket. The Democratic National Convention nominated General Winfield Scott Hancock of Pennsylvania on the second ballot at its June 22-24, 1880 Cincinnati convention. Hancock was 56, a Union army hero who had commanded the federal defense at Gettysburg (July 1863) where he had been severely wounded. He had no political experience. William H. English of Indiana was the vice presidential candidate. The Democratic platform attacked Republican corruption and called for an end to "centralization" of federal power.

The Greenback Party - which advocated paper money expansion and federal labor protections - nominated General James B. Weaver of Iowa. The Greenback platform attacked the gold standard and supported the 8-hour workday, federal regulation of railroads, women's suffrage, and direct election of senators. The Greenback movement's 1878-1880 peak reflected agrarian economic distress following the Panic of 1873.

The campaign was bland. Neither Garfield nor Hancock campaigned actively. The issues were tariff policy (Republicans wanted higher tariffs; Democrats lower), civil-service reform (Republicans divided; Democrats opposed), and lingering Reconstruction questions (Republicans wanted some federal protection for Black civil rights; Democrats wanted complete withdrawal). The campaign's defining moment was the "Morey letter" - a forged document attributed to Garfield endorsing Chinese immigration. The letter was published in late October and almost cost Garfield California; Republican press denied it was authentic and weathered the storm.

Garfield won 214 electoral votes to Hancock's 155. Weaver won 0 electoral votes but 308,578 popular votes (3.3%). Garfield carried 19 states; Hancock carried 19 states. Garfield's electoral edge came from larger Northern states with more electoral votes per state. The popular vote: Garfield 4,453,337 (48.3%); Hancock 4,444,267 (48.2%); Weaver 308,578 (3.3%). The Garfield-Hancock margin was 9,070 popular votes - the smallest popular-vote margin in U.S. presidential history.

Garfield was inaugurated March 4, 1881. He immediately faced Stalwart-Half-Breed warfare over Cabinet appointments. Conkling demanded continued Stalwart control of New York federal patronage; Garfield refused. Conkling and his New York colleague Senator Thomas C. Platt resigned from the Senate in May 1881 in protest, expecting the New York legislature to re-elect them; they were not re-elected. The Stalwart-Half-Breed warfare was at its peak when Charles Guiteau - a disappointed office-seeker who had failed to receive a consular appointment despite expecting one as a Stalwart loyalist - shot Garfield at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station on July 2, 1881. Garfield lingered for 79 days before dying September 19, 1881.

Vice President Chester A. Arthur became the 21st president. Despite being a Stalwart, Arthur reversed his prior commitments and supported civil-service reform. The January 16, 1883 Pendleton Civil Service Act established merit-based hiring for many federal positions and created the U.S. Civil Service Commission. The 1880 election was the structural precursor to the Pendleton Act's passage; Garfield's assassination by a disappointed office-seeker was the immediate political catalyst.

10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1880 Election

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Key words

Stalwarts	The Republican faction led by Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York. Defended the spoils system; wanted Grant to return for a third term in 1880. Lost the 1880 nomination to Garfield; politically damaged by Guiteau's assassination of Garfield.
Half-Breeds	The Republican faction led by Senator James G. Blaine of Maine. Supported civil-service reform. The name was a derogatory Stalwart label suggesting Half-Breeds were not fully Republican. Eventually consolidated Republican Party control.
Greenback Party	The 1870s-1880s third party advocating paper-money expansion and federal labor protections. The 1880 candidate James B. Weaver won 3.3% of the popular vote and no electoral votes. The party's positions would influence the later Populist Party (1890s).
Pendleton Civil Service Act	The January 16, 1883 federal law establishing merit-based hiring for many federal positions and creating the U.S. Civil Service Commission. Passed after the July 1881 assassination of President Garfield by a disappointed office-seeker. Replaced large parts of the Jacksonian spoils system.

Charles Guiteau	The disappointed office-seeker who shot President Garfield on July 2, 1881. Guiteau had failed to receive a consular appointment despite expecting one as a Stalwart loyalist. Garfield died September 19, 1881; Guiteau was tried, convicted, and hanged June 30, 1882.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did James A. Garfield win in 1880?

( ) A. 203
( ) B. 214
( ) C. 231
( ) D. 247

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

On which ballot did the Republican Convention nominate James A. Garfield?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Charles Guiteau's July 1881 shooting of President Garfield lead to the 1883 Pendleton Civil Service Act?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the 1880 popular-vote margin between Garfield and Hancock, and what does the number reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

214. Garfield 214; Hancock 155; Weaver 0.

Garfield's 214 EV was a clear Electoral College margin despite a razor-thin popular vote.

QUESTION 2

36th ballot. The Republican Convention deadlocked for 35 ballots between Grant (Stalwart), Blaine (Half-Breed), Edmunds (Independent), and others. Garfield emerged as a compromise dark-horse candidate on the 36th ballot after a Wisconsin delegate began voting for him on the 34th ballot.

AP students should know the 36-ballot nomination as a sign of Republican Party factionalism.

QUESTION 3

Guiteau's shooting of Garfield was widely understood as the direct result of the spoils system. Guiteau had failed to receive a consular appointment despite expecting one as a Stalwart loyalist; he believed his disappointment justified shooting the president. The political consequence: civil-service reform - which had been advocated by reformers for decades - suddenly had a martyred symbol and a horrific cautionary tale. Public opinion shifted decisively in favor of merit-based hiring. President Chester A. Arthur (a Stalwart) reversed his prior commitments and supported reform. The Pendleton Civil Service Act passed Congress January 1883 and established merit-based hiring and the U.S. Civil Service Commission. The structural reform that decades of advocacy had failed to deliver took 18 months after the assassination.

AP students should be able to articulate the political mechanism by which a single assassination produced structural reform.

QUESTION 4

The 1880 popular-vote margin was 9,070 votes (Garfield 4,453,337 to Hancock 4,444,267) - the smallest popular-vote margin in U.S. presidential history. The number reveals: (1) the Republican-Democratic electoral coalitions were almost evenly matched in 1880; (2) Garfield's electoral edge came entirely from the geographic distribution of votes, not from popular preference; (3) the Reconstruction-era Republican advantage had largely evaporated by 1880; (4) the next two decades would see almost evenly contested elections between Republicans and Democrats. The 1880 result is the structural template for the 1880s-1890s competitive era.

AP students should know the 9,070-vote margin as the smallest in U.S. history.