1880

James A. Garfield vs Winfield Scott Hancock

A 50-minute lesson on the 1880 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

CONTENTS

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

1880: James A. Garfield vs Winfield Scott Hancock

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 1880 that would let an unintended dark-horse candidate win his party's presidential nomination. For each, identify the specific 1877-1880 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1880 election was the 24th U.S. presidential election. It produced James A. Garfield's dark-horse victory by the smallest popular-vote margin in U.S. presidential history (9,070 votes) and his subsequent assassination by a disappointed office-seeker. The election's structural legacy was the January 1883 Pendleton Civil Service Act - the structural endpoint of the Jacksonian spoils system that had dominated federal employment since 1829. The Republican Party was bitterly divided after Hayes's civil-service reform efforts. Two factions had emerged: (1) the Stalwarts, led by Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York, who defended the spoils system and wanted former President Grant to return for a third term; (2) the Half-Breeds, led by Senator James G. Blaine of Maine, who supported civil-service reform but were politically pragmatic about patronage. 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 (304 votes initially); Blaine (284 votes); Edmunds (34 votes); Senator John Sherman of Ohio (93 votes, Treasury Secretary under Hayes); and others. James A. Garfield, 48, an Ohio Republican congressman who had come to the convention to nominate 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 and the suspended Collector of the Port of New York - was selected as the vice presidential candidate to balance the ticket geographically and factionally. The Democratic National Convention met in Cincinnati on June 22-24, 1880. The convention nominated General Winfield Scott Hancock of Pennsylvania on the second ballot. 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 - founded 1874 to advocate paper-money expansion - had emerged in the 1878 midterm elections as a significant third party. The party's February 1880 Chicago convention nominated General James B. Weaver of Iowa. The Greenback platform attacked the gold standard and supported the 8-hour work-day, federal regulation of railroads, women's suffrage, direct election of senators, and graduated income tax. The Greenback movement's 1878-1880 peak reflected agrarian economic distress following the Panic of 1873. Weaver would later become the 1892 Populist Party nominee.

The campaign was less personal than 1876. Neither Garfield nor Hancock campaigned actively (the candidate-as-private-citizen norm still held). The issues were tariff policy (Republicans wanted higher tariffs; Democrats lower); civil-service reform (Republicans divided; Democrats opposed); and Chinese immigration (the Chinese Exclusion Act would pass in 1882). The campaign's defining moment was the "Morey letter" - a forged document attributed to Garfield endorsing Chinese immigration. Published October 20, 1880, the letter almost cost Garfield California; Republican press denied authenticity and weathered the storm. The forgery was later attributed to Democratic operatives.

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 (a record that still stands as of 2024).

Garfield was inaugurated March 4, 1881. He immediately faced Stalwart-Half-Breed warfare over Cabinet appointments. Senator Conkling demanded continued Stalwart control of New York federal patronage; Garfield refused, appointing Half-Breed William H. Robertson as Collector of the Port of New York (the most lucrative federal patronage position outside Washington). 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 in vindication; they were not re-elected. The Stalwart faction was politically damaged.

The Stalwart-Half-Breed warfare was at its peak when Charles Guiteau shot Garfield at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, DC at 9:30 a.m. on July 2, 1881. Guiteau was a disappointed office-seeker who had failed to receive a consular appointment despite expecting one as a Stalwart loyalist. After shooting

		Garfield, Guiteau allegedly shouted: "I am a Stalwart of the Stalwarts! Arthur is President now!" Garfield lingered for 79 days, partly because his doctors probed his wound with unwashed fingers, causing massive infection that ultimately killed him on September 19, 1881. Garfield was the second U.S. president to be assassinated, after Lincoln in 1865. 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 Act initially covered only 10% of federal positions but provided the framework for gradual expansion; by the mid-20th century, the merit-based civil service had largely displaced the spoils system. The 1880 election's structural significance was its production of the political conditions that made the Pendleton Act possible.
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

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 destroyed by Guiteau's assassination of Garfield (Guiteau identified himself as "a Stalwart of the Stalwarts").

Half-Breeds

The Republican faction led by Senator James G. Blaine of Maine. Supported civil-service reform but were politically pragmatic about patronage. The name was a derogatory Stalwart label suggesting Half-Breeds were not fully Republican.

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. Weaver would later become the 1892 Populist Party nominee.

Morey letter

The forged October 1880 letter attributed to Garfield endorsing Chinese immigration. Published October 20 in the New York Truth. The forgery almost cost Garfield California; Republican press denied authenticity. Later attributed to Democratic operatives.

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 at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, DC. 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.

Inaugural Address

JAMES A. GARFIELD, MARCH 4, 1881

Garfield took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1881. The address explicitly endorsed civil-service reform and racial-equality protection - both positions associated with the Half-Breed Republican faction. The "no thoughtful man" framing on civil-service reform was Garfield's commitment to merit-based federal employment, directly opposed to the Stalwart defense of the spoils system. Garfield would face Stalwart obstruction throughout his short presidency over the Cabinet appointment fight that led to Conkling's May 1881 resignation.

> *"The civil service can never be placed on a satisfactory basis until it is regulated by law. For the good of the service itself, for the protection of those who are intrusted with the appointing power against the waste of time and obstruction to the public business caused by the inordinate pressure for place, and for the protection of incumbents against intrigue and wrong, I shall at the proper time ask Congress to fix the tenure of the minor offices of the several Executive Departments and prescribe the grounds upon which removals shall be made during the terms for which incumbents have been appointed."*

Garfield, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1881). Public domain.

The 1880 Election

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

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 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many popular votes separated Garfield and Hancock in 1880?

( ) A. 1,847
( ) B. 9,070
( ) C. 23,415
( ) D. 54,289

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

On which ballot did the Republican Convention nominate Garfield, and what does the multi-ballot deadlock tell you about Republican Party factionalism?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What did Charles Guiteau allegedly shout after shooting Garfield, and how did the statement damage the Stalwart Republican faction?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Garfield says in his inaugural that "the civil service can never be placed on a satisfactory basis until it is regulated by law." Identify the specific 1883 federal law that operationalized this commitment.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1880 election map, identify Garfield's 19 states and Hancock's 19 states. What pattern emerges, and why did Garfield win the Electoral College despite equal state counts?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

214. Garfield 214; Hancock 155; Weaver 0.

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

QUESTION 2

9,070. Garfield 4,453,337 to Hancock 4,444,267. The smallest popular-vote margin in U.S. presidential history (a record that still stands as of 2024).

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

QUESTION 3

36th ballot. The Republican Convention deadlocked for 35 ballots between Grant (Stalwart), Blaine (Half-Breed), Edmunds (Independent), Sherman (Hayes administration), and others. The deadlock tells you Republican Party factionalism had reached an extreme. The Stalwart-Half-Breed split was so severe that neither faction could nominate its preferred candidate. Garfield emerged as a compromise dark-horse on the 36th ballot - he was acceptable to Half-Breeds (as a moderate reformer) and tolerable to Stalwarts (paired with Stalwart VP Arthur).

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance of the 36-ballot nomination.

QUESTION 4

Guiteau allegedly shouted "I am a Stalwart of the Stalwarts! Arthur is President now!" after shooting Garfield. The statement damaged the Stalwart faction in three ways: (1) it directly tied the Stalwart cause to political assassination; (2) it suggested Arthur's succession was a Stalwart political coup, not just an unfortunate succession; (3) it transformed the Stalwart defense of the spoils system from a routine political position into a position associated with murderous violence. The Stalwart faction's political collapse after July 1881 was rapid. Conkling lost his Senate seat. Arthur reversed his Stalwart commitments and supported civil-service reform. The faction effectively dissolved.

AP students should be able to identify the structural damage Guiteau's statement did to the Stalwart faction.

QUESTION 5

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. The Act initially covered only 10% of federal positions but provided the framework for gradual expansion. By the mid-20th century, merit-based civil service had largely displaced the spoils system.

AP students should know the Pendleton Act as the operationalization of civil-service reform.

QUESTION 6

Garfield states: 19 states including all of New England (6 states), the Mid-Atlantic (NY, PA, NJ - though NJ went to Hancock), the Midwest (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota), plus California, Oregon, and Kansas/Nebraska/Colorado. Hancock states: 19 states including the entire South (the 11 former Confederate states), the Border States (Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware), New Jersey, and Nevada. Pattern: Garfield held the Northern Republican coalition while Hancock had effectively consolidated the post-Reconstruction "Solid South." Despite each candidate carrying 19 states, Garfield won the Electoral College because Northern states had more electoral votes per state (New York 35, Pennsylvania 29, Ohio 22, Illinois 21) than Southern states (Texas 8, Florida 4, etc.). The 1880 map established the "Solid South" pattern that would dominate U.S. politics until the 1960s.

AP students should be able to read the 1880 map as evidence of the post-Reconstruction Solid South.