1880

James A. Garfield vs Winfield Scott Hancock

A 20-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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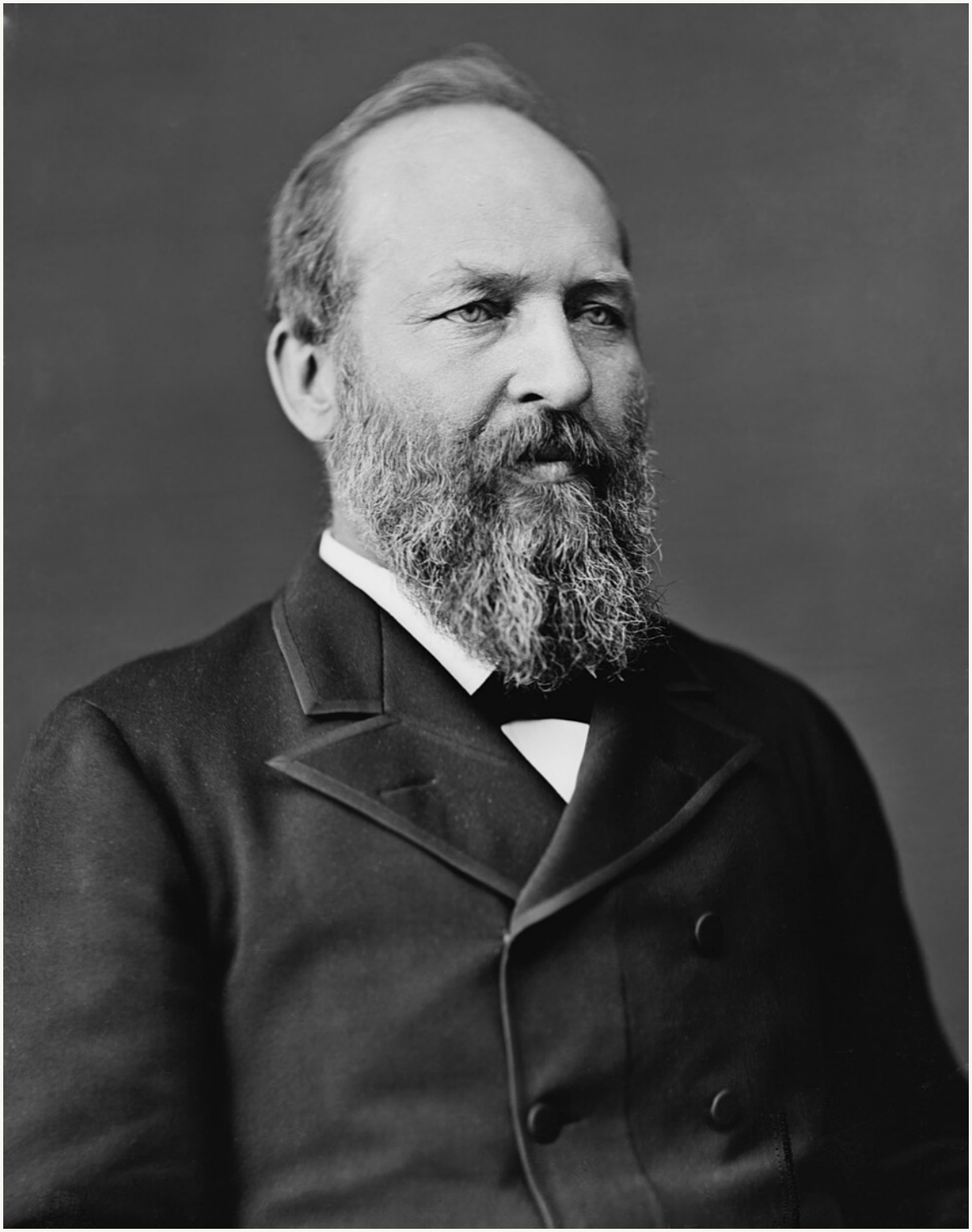
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After Rutherford Hayes ended Reconstruction, the country was ready for a new president. The Republicans met to pick their candidate. Two famous Republican groups fought each other. The "Stalwarts" supported former president Grant to run again. The "Half-Breeds" supported Senator James G. Blaine of Maine. Neither group could get enough votes.

For 36 ballots the Convention was stuck. Then someone shouted the name of James Garfield - a congressman from Ohio who had come to the convention to give a speech for someone else! Garfield was a great speaker. He had been a Civil War general. He had served in Congress for 17 years. Look at the picture. That is Garfield.

On the 36th ballot, the Republicans picked Garfield as a surprise compromise. He was the second dark horse Republican nominee after Hayes in 1876. The Republican Convention also picked Chester A. Arthur to be vice president. Arthur was a Stalwart - the group that had wanted Grant.

The Democrats picked General Winfield Scott Hancock, a Civil War general. The election was very close. Garfield won 214 electoral votes. Hancock got 155. The popular vote was decided by fewer than 10,000 votes - one of the closest popular votes in U.S.



James A. Garfield, the 20th U.S. president. He served only 200 days before dying from a gunshot wound by a disappointed office-seeker.
MATHEW BRADY (1822-1896), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 20th U.S. president after the 1880 election?

2.

What happened to President Garfield on July 2, 1881?

3.

What good change came out of Garfield's death?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1880 a man who had not been planning to run for president ended up winning. James Garfield was sent to the Republican Convention to support someone else - and accidentally got nominated himself!

Answer key

1.

James A. Garfield. He won 214 electoral votes to General Hancock's 155. He served only 200 days before dying from a gunshot wound.

Garfield was the second U.S. president to be assassinated, after Lincoln in 1865.

2.

Garfield was shot by Charles Guiteau, a disappointed office-seeker who was angry because Garfield had not given him a government job. The shooting happened at the Baltimore and Potomac Railroad Station in Washington, DC. Garfield lingered for 79 days before dying on September 19, 1881. Vice President Chester A. Arthur became the 21st president.

Garfield's slow death was partly due to medical malpractice - doctors probed his wound with unwashed fingers, causing massive infection that killed him.

3.

Garfield's death led to the 1883 Pendleton Civil Service Act. This law created merit-based hiring for federal jobs and set up the U.S. Civil Service Commission. It replaced large parts of the old "spoils system" where presidents would give federal jobs to their political supporters. After 1883, most federal employees were hired based on competitive examinations rather than political connections.

The Pendleton Act is one of the most consequential federal reforms in U.S. history. It transformed federal employment from political patronage to professional civil service.