3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1884

Grover Cleveland vs James G. Blaine

A 35-minute lesson on the 1884 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Gilded Age	ELECTORAL VOTES 401 total
WINNER Grover Cleveland (Democratic) · 219 EV	RUNNER-UP James G. Blaine (Republican) · 182 EV
KEY ISSUE Political corruption; civil service reform; tariff policy	TURNOUT 78.2%

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

1884: Grover Cleveland vs James G. Blaine

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a candidate has a personal scandal AND a corruption record, which is harder to overcome politically? Why might Cleveland (personal scandal) survive 1884 while Blaine (corruption scandal) lose?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1884 election was the 25th U.S. presidential election. It ended the 28-year Republican monopoly on the presidency (since 1856) with Grover Cleveland's 219-182 electoral-vote victory over James G. Blaine. The election was decided by 1,047 votes in New York - the closest deciding state in U.S. presidential history. The campaign was widely regarded as the dirtiest in U.S. history up to that point. The Republican Party had been fractured by the 1881-1883 Garfield assassination and Pendleton Act struggle. The Stalwart faction had been destroyed by Guiteau's assassination of Garfield (Conkling and Platt had resigned the Senate in May 1881 and not been re-elected; Arthur had reversed his Stalwart commitments and signed the Pendleton Act). With the Stalwart faction gone, the Half-Breeds dominated Republican politics. Senator James G. Blaine of Maine - the longtime Half-Breed leader - was the inevitable Republican nominee in 1884. Blaine was a powerful orator and political organizer, but he carried significant scandal baggage. In 1876, during his first attempt at the Republican nomination, the Mulligan letters had emerged - correspondence between Blaine and a railroad executive showing Blaine had accepted favors in exchange for legislative help. The letters had ended with the phrase "burn this letter" - which Blaine had instructed but his correspondent had preserved. The Mulligan letters had cost Blaine the 1876 nomination (Hayes won). They re-emerged in 1880 (Garfield won the deadlocked convention) and again in 1884. A significant Republican faction refused to support Blaine. They called themselves "Mugwumps" (from an Algonquin word meaning "great man" - originally used mockingly but adopted by the group). The Mugwump leaders included newspaper editor Carl Schurz, Massachusetts Senator George F. Hoar, and Harvard president Charles Eliot. They were primarily reform-minded New England Republicans who had supported civil-service reform and could not tolerate Blaine's corruption record. The Mugwumps endorsed the Democratic nominee. The Democratic National Convention met in Chicago on July 8-11, 1884. The convention nominated Governor Grover Cleveland of New York on the second ballot. Cleveland was 47, a former mayor of Buffalo (1882) and governor of New York (1883-85). He had a reputation for honesty and had vetoed many bad bills as

governor; reformers called him "Grover the Good." Thomas A. Hendricks of Indiana was the vice presidential candidate.

The campaign produced two famous scandals that defined the race. In July 1884, the Buffalo Evening Telegraph published a story revealing that Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate son in 1874 with a Buffalo widow named Maria Halpin. Cleveland's response was characteristic: he told his campaign "tell the truth." He admitted to providing financial support for the child (Oscar Folsom Cleveland) even though paternity was uncertain (Halpin had been involved with multiple men). Republican papers ran the story under the headline "A Terrible Tale" and Republican rallies chanted "Ma, ma, where's my pa?" Democrats responded after Cleveland won: "Gone to the White House, ha ha ha!"

On October 29, 1884 - six days before the election - Protestant minister Samuel D. Burchard spoke at a Republican rally at Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York City. He called the Democratic Party "the party of Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." Rum = anti-temperance; Romanism = Roman Catholicism; Rebellion = the Confederacy. The remark deeply insulted Irish Catholic voters in New York City. Blaine was sitting on the platform when Burchard spoke but did not denounce the insult - either because he had not heard it clearly or because he had failed to recognize its political toxicity. The Democrats immediately seized on the remark. Cleveland's campaign distributed thousands of leaflets quoting Burchard. The Irish Catholic vote in New York City swung decisively to Cleveland.

Cleveland won 219 electoral votes to Blaine's 182. Cleveland carried 20 states; Blaine carried 18. The popular vote: Cleveland 4,914,482 (48.5%); Blaine 4,856,903 (48.3%); Butler 175,370 (Greenback, 1.7%); St. John 150,369 (Prohibition, 1.5%). The Cleveland-Blaine popular-vote margin was 57,579 - one of the smaller margins in U.S. history. The decisive state was New York (36 electoral votes), which Cleveland won by 1,047 votes out of 1.17 million cast. New York had been Blaine's home-state advantage; without the Burchard incident, Blaine probably would have won New York and the presidency.

Cleveland was inaugurated March 4, 1885. He governed as a fiscally conservative reform Democrat: he supported the Pendleton civil-service reform; he vetoed many private pension bills for Civil War veterans (414 vetoes in his first term, more than all prior presidents combined); he supported tariff reduction; he opposed federal subsidies to railroads. He did not pursue progressive labor or agrarian policies. Cleveland would lose his 1888 re-election bid to Benjamin Harrison (despite winning the popular vote) but return to win in 1892 - making him the only president to serve two non-consecutive terms (the 22nd and 24th president).

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 1884 Election

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Key words

Mugwumps	The Republicans who refused to support Blaine in 1884 because of his Mulligan-letters bribery record. They voted for Democrat Grover Cleveland instead. Primarily reform-minded New England Republicans led by newspaper editor Carl Schurz, Senator George F. Hoar, and Harvard president Charles Eliot.
Mulligan letters	Correspondence between James G. Blaine and a railroad executive showing Blaine had accepted favors in exchange for legislative help. The letters had ended with "burn this letter" - which Blaine had instructed but his correspondent had preserved. First emerged in 1876, re-emerged in 1880 and 1884.

Maria Halpin scandal	The July 1884 campaign scandal in which a Buffalo widow named Maria Halpin claimed Cleveland had fathered her son Oscar Folsom Cleveland in 1874. Cleveland told his campaign "tell the truth" and admitted providing financial support even though paternity was uncertain (Halpin had been involved with multiple men).
Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion	The October 29, 1884 remark by Protestant minister Samuel D. Burchard at a Republican rally at Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York City. Rum = anti-temperance; Romanism = Roman Catholicism; Rebellion = the Confederacy. The remark insulted Irish Catholic voters; Blaine did not denounce it; the damage cost Blaine New York by 1,047 votes.
Grover the Good	Cleveland's reform reputation as governor of New York (1883-85). He had vetoed many bad bills and refused political favors. Reformers contrasted Cleveland's honest governance with Blaine's corruption record. The reputation was instrumental in winning Mugwump Republican support.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Grover Cleveland win in 1884?

( ) A. 203
( ) B. 219
( ) C. 231
( ) D. 247

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" remark on October 29, 1884 affect the election outcome?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was Cleveland's response to the Maria Halpin scandal, and what does it reveal about his political character?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why is the 1884 election historically significant beyond Cleveland's individual victory?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

219. Cleveland 219; Blaine 182. Cleveland carried 20 states; Blaine carried 18.

Cleveland's 37-EV margin was decisive but not overwhelming.

QUESTION 2

Burchard's remark called the Democratic Party "the party of Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" - insulting Irish Catholic voters in New York. Blaine, sitting on the platform, did not denounce the insult. The Democrats immediately seized on the remark; Cleveland's campaign distributed thousands of leaflets. The Irish Catholic vote in New York City swung decisively to Cleveland. Cleveland won New York by 1,047 votes - probably the smallest deciding-state margin in U.S. history. Without the Burchard incident, Blaine almost certainly would have won New York and the presidency. The remark is one of the most consequential campaign gaffes in U.S. history.

AP students should be able to articulate the causal chain from a single rally remark to the election outcome.

QUESTION 3

Cleveland's response was: "tell the truth." He admitted providing financial support for the child (Oscar Folsom Cleveland) even though paternity was uncertain. The response reveals: (1) Cleveland's political instinct prioritized honesty over damage control - he refused to lie or evade. (2) The response neutralized the scandal's political damage by removing the cover-up element. (3) The Mugwumps who had supported Cleveland for his reform reputation continued to support him because his response confirmed his character. (4) The response is widely cited as a classic example of "honesty as political strategy" - acknowledge the scandal directly to deny opponents the cover-up narrative.

AP students should be able to articulate Cleveland's political-character profile.

QUESTION 4

The 1884 election is historically significant beyond Cleveland's individual victory for several reasons: (1) Cleveland was the first Democrat elected president since James Buchanan in 1856 - a 28-year Republican monopoly was broken. (2) The election demonstrated that the Republican-Democratic competitive equilibrium that had begun in 1880 was real and would persist. (3) The Mugwump Republicans - reform-minded Republicans who refused to support a corrupt nominee - established that independent voting by party defectors could swing national elections. (4) Cleveland would also win in 1892, becoming the only president to serve two non-consecutive terms. (5) The 1884 result inaugurated the Cleveland-Harrison-Cleveland-McKinley sequence of close presidential elections.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance.