# 1884

## *Grover Cleveland vs James G. Blaine*

A 50-minute lesson on the 1884 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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

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3. Background: key terms + source
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# 1884: Grover Cleveland vs James G. Blaine

## 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

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| **5 min** | **Warm-up** | List two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1884 that would produce a Democratic presidential victory after 28 years of Republican dominance. For each, identify the specific 1877-1884 development most responsible. |
| **15 min** | **Reading + vocab** | 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.<br><br>The Republican Party had been fractured by the 1881-1883 Garfield assassination and Pendleton Civil Service Act struggle. The Stalwart faction had been destroyed by Guiteau's assassination of Garfield (Senator Roscoe Conkling and Senator Thomas C. Platt had resigned the Senate in May 1881 and not been re-elected; Arthur had reversed his Stalwart commitments and signed the January 1883 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.<br><br>The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 3-6, 1884. The convention nominated Blaine on the fourth ballot over President Chester A. Arthur (who had wanted re-nomination as a token of vindication for his Pendleton Act support) and Senator George F. Edmunds of Vermont (the Independent faction's candidate). John A. Logan of Illinois was the vice presidential candidate.<br><br>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, Harvard president Charles Eliot, Henry Ward Beecher, and Mark Twain. 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 - a Civil War-era "Copperhead" who had won the 1876 Democratic vice presidential nomination on the Tilden ticket - 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 headlines like "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.

The campaign also featured the Belshazzar's Feast banquet - a Republican dinner at Delmonico's on October 29, 1884 (the same day as the Burchard remark) attended by Blaine and prominent New York industrialists. A New York World cartoon depicted the banquet as a "millionaires' feast" mocking the poor. The image solidified the Democratic narrative that Blaine was the candidate of corrupt wealth.

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

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| | | (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.<br><br>Cleveland was inaugurated March 4, 1885. He governed as a fiscally conservative reform Democrat: he supported 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 (1887 annual message focused entirely on tariff reform); 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. |
| **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

### 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 Carl Schurz, George F. Hoar, Charles Eliot, Henry Ward Beecher, and Mark Twain.

### 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).

### Belshazzar's Feast

The October 29, 1884 Republican dinner at Delmonico's in New York City attended by Blaine and prominent New York industrialists. The New York World cartoon depicted the banquet as a "millionaires' feast" mocking the poor. Solidified the Democratic narrative that Blaine was the candidate of corrupt wealth.

### 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.

### 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. Insulted Irish Catholic voters; Blaine did not denounce; 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. Reputation was instrumental in winning Mugwump Republican support.

## Inaugural Address

### GROVER CLEVELAND, MARCH 4, 1885

*Cleveland took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1885 - the first Democrat to deliver an inaugural address since James Buchanan in 1857. The address was relatively brief (about 1,700 words). The "no thoughtful man" passage articulates Cleveland's civil-service-reform commitment, continuing the Pendleton Act framework that Republicans had established in 1883. The civil-service reform commitment was crucial to retaining Mugwump Republican support. Cleveland would issue executive orders during his first term extending civil-service coverage to additional federal positions.*

> *"The people demand reform in the administration of the Government and the application of business principles to public affairs. As a means to this end, civil-service reform should be in good faith enforced. Our citizens have the right to protection from the incompetency of public employees who hold their places solely as the reward of partisan service, and from the corrupting influence of those who promise and the vicious methods of those who expect such rewards; and those who worthily seek public employment have the right to insist that merit and competency shall be recognized instead of party subserviency or the surrender of honest political belief."*

**Cleveland, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1885). Public domain.**

# The 1884 Election

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

**QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How many electoral votes did Grover Cleveland win in 1884?

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

**QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

By how many votes did Cleveland win New York in 1884?

( ) A. 523
( ) B. 1,047
( ) C. 4,308
( ) D. 12,855

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Who were the Mugwumps and what role did they play in 1884?

**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

How did Cleveland's "tell the truth" response to the Maria Halpin scandal differ from a typical campaign damage-control approach, and why was it politically effective?

**QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Cleveland says in his inaugural that "civil-service reform should be in good faith enforced." Why was this commitment politically necessary for Cleveland's Democratic administration in 1885?

**QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ**

On the 1884 election map, identify Cleveland's 20 states and Blaine's 18 states. What pattern emerges, and how is New York's decisiveness reflected in the geography?

# Answer key

## QUESTION 1

219. Cleveland 219; Blaine 182.

Cleveland's 37-EV margin was decisive.

## QUESTION 2

1,047. Cleveland 563,154 to Blaine 562,107 out of 1.17 million votes cast.

The 1,047-vote New York margin is the closest deciding-state margin in U.S. presidential history.

## QUESTION 3

The Mugwumps were Republicans who refused to support Blaine in 1884 because of his Mulligan-letters bribery record. The name comes from an Algonquin word meaning "great man" - originally used mockingly but adopted by the group. They were primarily reform-minded New England Republicans led by Carl Schurz, George F. Hoar, Charles Eliot, Henry Ward Beecher, and Mark Twain. They had supported civil-service reform and could not tolerate Blaine's corruption record. The Mugwumps endorsed Cleveland and provided the structural margin for his victory: Cleveland won 1,047 votes in New York; the Mugwump defection contributed many times that margin in Republican-leaning New York counties. The Mugwumps established that independent voting by party defectors could swing national elections.

AP students should be able to articulate Mugwump significance.

## QUESTION 4

Cleveland's "tell the truth" response was the opposite of typical damage control. Typical approach: deny the scandal, blame opponents for false accusations, hope the story dies. Cleveland's approach: acknowledge the scandal, admit the underlying conduct (financial support for the child even though paternity uncertain), refuse to deny anything that could be later proven true. The approach was politically effective in four ways: (1) it removed the cover-up element that scandals typically generate; (2) it confirmed Cleveland's character as honest, which was the basis of his Mugwump support; (3) it shifted public attention to Blaine's corruption record by contrast; (4) it gave Cleveland a defensible narrative that survived republican attacks. The approach is widely cited as a classic example of "honesty as political strategy."

AP students should be able to articulate the political mechanism.

## QUESTION 5

The civil-service reform commitment was politically necessary in 1885 for three specific reasons: (1) Cleveland had won the presidency with crucial Mugwump Republican support; the Mugwumps had supported him primarily because of his reform reputation, and reversing course would have alienated them politically. (2) The 1883 Pendleton Act had created institutional momentum for merit-based hiring; a Democratic administration that reversed it would have produced a partisan backlash. (3) Cleveland's "Grover the Good" reputation depended on his refusal to engage in political patronage; abandoning civil-service reform would have damaged his political brand. (4) Many Cleveland supporters - both Mugwump Republicans and reform Democrats - had specifically supported civil-service reform; reversing the commitment would have alienated his coalition.

AP students should be able to articulate the political coalition pressures.

## QUESTION 6

Cleveland states: 20 states including the entire South (11 former Confederate states plus 4 Border States), the swing states of New York and Indiana, and Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania (no, Pennsylvania went Republican). Blaine states: 18 states including all of New England except Connecticut, the Midwest (Ohio, Indiana - no, Indiana went Cleveland), and the West Coast. The pattern: Cleveland consolidated the Solid South + won the two key Northern swing states (New York, Indiana) + Connecticut and New Jersey. Blaine retained the rest of the Northern Republican coalition. New York's 36 electoral votes were the difference between victory and defeat for both candidates. Without New York, Cleveland would have lost 183-218 and Blaine would have won 218-183.

AP students should be able to read the New York-decides geography.