1884

Grover Cleveland vs James G. Blaine

A 75-minute lesson on the 1884 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1884: Grover Cleveland vs James G. Blaine

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1884 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1884 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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. 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. 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 - a Civil War general - was the vice presidential candidate. 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 including Jay Gould and Cornelius Vanderbilt II. 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 (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 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 - making him the only president to serve two non-consecutive terms (the 22nd and 24th president).

The 1884 election's structural significance was threefold: (1) The Republican monopoly on the presidency was broken, demonstrating that the Republican-Democratic competitive equilibrium that had begun in 1880 would persist. (2) The Mugwump phenomenon - reform-minded party defectors swinging a national election - established that independent voting could be politically decisive. (3) Cleveland's reform Democratic governance demonstrated that the post-Reconstruction Democratic Party could be both the Solid South party AND a national party with reform credentials. The 1884 result inaugurated the Cleveland-Harrison-Cleveland-McKinley sequence of competitive elections that would dominate U.S. politics until 1896. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.

15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1884 election tells you about the Gilded Age era that the textbook didn't?"

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 Cleveland instead. Primarily reform-minded New England Republicans led by Carl Schurz, George F. Hoar, Charles Eliot, Henry Ward Beecher, 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.

Belshazzar's Feast

The October 29, 1884 Republican dinner at Delmonico's in New York City attended by Blaine and prominent New York industrialists (Jay Gould, Cornelius Vanderbilt II). The New York World cartoon depicted the banquet as a "millionaires' feast" mocking the poor.

Solid South

The pattern of consistent Democratic Party dominance in former Confederate states from approximately 1880 to 1960. Established by the post-Reconstruction collapse of Republican governance and the subsequent disenfranchisement of Black voters.

Mulligan letters

Correspondence between Blaine and a railroad executive showing Blaine had accepted favors in exchange for legislative help. The letters had ended with "burn this letter" - Blaine had instructed but his correspondent had preserved. First emerged 1876, re-emerged 1880 and 1884.

Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion

The October 29, 1884 remark by Protestant minister Samuel D. Burchard at a Republican rally. 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. Crucial to Mugwump 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 civil-service reform commitment articulated here 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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did 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 structural role did they play in 1884?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Cleveland's "tell the truth" response to the Maria Halpin scandal demonstrate a political strategy that subsequent campaigns have studied?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Cleveland says in his inaugural that "civil-service reform should be in good faith enforced." How does this commitment relate to the political coalition that elected Cleveland in 1884?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

What does the Burchard "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" incident reveal about the structural composition of the New York Republican vote in 1884?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1884 election map, identify Cleveland's 20 states and Blaine's 18 states. What pattern emerges?

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. They voted for Democrat Cleveland instead. They were primarily reform-minded New England Republicans led by Carl Schurz, George F. Hoar, Charles Eliot, Henry Ward Beecher, and Mark Twain. The structural role: (1) They provided the margin for Cleveland's victory in Republican-leaning New York counties; (2) they demonstrated that independent voting by party defectors could swing national elections; (3) they established the precedent for reform-minded voters refusing to support corrupt party nominees; (4) they reflected the political weight of the post-Pendleton civil-service-reform constituency that had become a structural feature of U.S. politics by 1884.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural Mugwump significance.

QUESTION 4

Cleveland's "tell the truth" response demonstrated four specific strategic principles that subsequent campaigns have studied: (1) Acknowledge the scandal directly rather than deny it. (2) Admit any underlying conduct that could be later proven true (Cleveland admitted financial support for the child). (3) Use the response to reinforce rather than undercut your political brand (Cleveland's "Grover the Good" reputation was confirmed, not contradicted, by his honesty). (4) Refuse to engage in cover-up that opponents can later exploit. The approach is widely cited as a classic example of "honesty as political strategy" - what political scientists later called "the Cleveland strategy" or "owning the scandal." The principle: scandal damage is usually less than cover-up damage; refusing the cover-up neutralizes the scandal's political toxicity.

AP students should be able to articulate the strategic principles.

QUESTION 5

The civil-service reform commitment in Cleveland's inaugural directly addresses the Mugwump Republican coalition that elected him. The Mugwumps had supported Cleveland primarily because of his reform reputation; reversing course on civil-service reform would have alienated them politically and damaged his political legitimacy. The "in good faith enforced" framing specifically commits to executive enforcement of the Pendleton Act framework that Republicans had passed in January 1883. Cleveland's commitment maintained the bipartisan civil-service-reform consensus that had emerged after the Garfield assassination. Cleveland would issue executive orders during his first term extending civil-service coverage to additional federal positions, fulfilling the inaugural commitment. The political message: the Democratic Party in 1885 was the reform party, not the patronage party.

AP students should be able to connect the inaugural commitment to political coalition.

QUESTION 6

The Burchard incident reveals: (1) The New York Republican vote in 1884 included a substantial Irish Catholic minority that could be lost to the Democratic Party by religious-bigotry remarks. (2) The Irish Catholic vote in New York was structurally tied to anti-Republican sentiment because Republican-aligned Protestant nativists had historically attacked Catholic immigration. (3) The Republican coalition's religious composition was fragile: predominantly Protestant but dependent on Irish Catholic voters in key states. (4) Blaine's failure to denounce Burchard reflected the Republican Party's structural weakness in managing the Protestant-Catholic religious divide. The 1,047-vote margin demonstrates how thin the Republican electoral margin in New York actually was. The Burchard incident also reveals the importance of religious affiliation in late 19th-century American politics - the era when "ethnocultural" rather than economic voting was structurally dominant.

AP students should be able to articulate the religious/ethnic composition of the New York Republican coalition.

QUESTION 7

Cleveland states: 20 states including the entire South (11 former Confederate states plus the 4 Border States: Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware), the swing states of New York and Indiana, and Connecticut and New Jersey. Blaine states: 18 states including all of New England except Connecticut, the rest of the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest, plus the West Coast and Mountain West. The pattern: Cleveland consolidated the Solid South + won the two key Northern swing states (New York, Indiana) + Connecticut and New Jersey. The Solid South's structural dominance is visible: every former Confederate state goes Democratic, plus the four Border States. New York's 36 electoral votes are the decisive difference. Without New York, Cleveland would have lost 183-218 and Blaine would have won 218-183.

AP students should be able to read the Solid South + swing-state geography.

Discussion prompts

1. The 1884 election was decided by 1,047 votes in New York - the closest deciding state in U.S. presidential history. Identify two specific October 1884 events that affected the New York outcome and explain the structural conditions that made New York decisive.

2 Cleveland was the first Democrat elected president since James Buchanan in 1856. Identify three structural changes between 1856 and 1884 that made Democratic victory possible.