K-2 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1884

Grover Cleveland vs James G. Blaine

A 20-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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1884

After Garfield died and Vice President Arthur finished his term, the country needed a new president. The Republicans had been in power for almost 30 years - since Abraham Lincoln won in 1860. Many Americans were tired of Republican scandals and wanted a change.

The Republicans picked Senator James G. Blaine of Maine. Blaine was famous, smart, and a great speaker. But many Americans did not trust him. Years earlier, Blaine had been accused of taking bribes from railroad companies. The story was in old letters Blaine had written that ended with "burn this letter" - which made him look guilty.

Some Republicans were so disgusted with Blaine that they refused to support him. They called themselves "Mugwumps." They voted for the Democratic candidate instead. The Mugwump leader was newspaper editor Carl Schurz.

The Democrats picked Grover Cleveland, the governor of New York. Cleveland was famous for being honest. He had vetoed many bad laws as governor. People called him "Grover the Good." But during the campaign, a Buffalo newspaper revealed Cleveland had

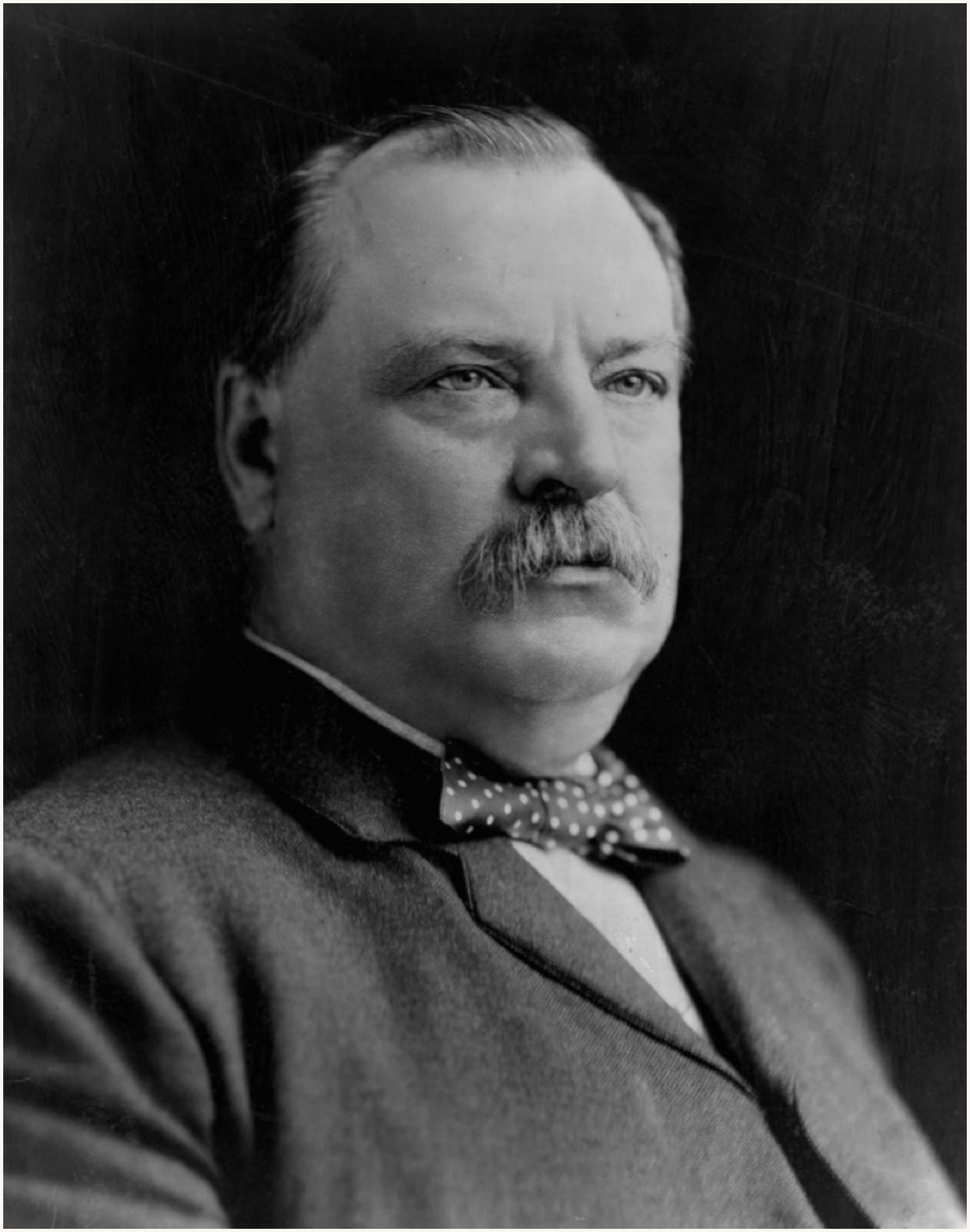
a secret. A woman named Maria Halpin claimed Cleveland had fathered her son. Cleveland told his campaign: "Tell the truth." He admitted he had supported the child financially even though paternity was uncertain.

Look at the picture. That is Grover Cleveland. He had a big mustache. He was a heavy man - about 280 pounds - and he never got married before becoming president.

The campaign was the dirtiest in U.S. history up to that point. Republicans chanted: "Ma, ma, where's my Pa?" Democrats responded after Cleveland won: "Gone to the White House, ha ha ha!"

In late October, a Protestant minister at a Republican rally called Democrats "the party of Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." Romanism meant Roman Catholic - which insulted Irish Catholic voters. Blaine did not denounce the insult. The damage cost Blaine New York by 1,047 votes.

Cleveland won 219 electoral votes to Blaine's 182. Cleveland won New York by 1,047 votes - the closest deciding state in U.S. history. He was the first Democrat elected president since James Buchanan in 1856.



Grover Cleveland, the 22nd U.S. president. He was the first Democrat elected since the Civil War. He won by just 1,047 votes in New York - the closest deciding state in U.S. history.
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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 22nd U.S. president after the 1884 election?

2.

How did the "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" insult hurt the Republican candidate Blaine?

3.

Why is Grover Cleveland's 1884 victory historically important?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1884 a Democrat finally won the White House. He was the first Democrat to win in 28 years - the first since before the Civil War. His name was Grover Cleveland.

Answer key

1.

Grover Cleveland. He won 219 electoral votes to Blaine's 182. He won by just 1,047 votes in New York - the closest deciding state in U.S. history.

Cleveland was the first Democrat elected president since James Buchanan in 1856.

2.

The "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" insult by Protestant minister Samuel D. Burchard at a Republican rally on October 29, 1884 - just six days before the election - called Democrats "the party of Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." Romanism meant Roman Catholic. This deeply insulted Irish Catholic voters in New York City. Blaine was sitting on the platform when Burchard spoke but did not denounce the insult. The damage was severe. New York had 1.2 million voters; Cleveland won the state by just 1,047 votes; the Irish Catholic vote in New York City alone was many times that margin. Without Burchard's remark, Blaine probably would have won New York and the presidency.

The Burchard incident is one of the most famous campaign gaffes in U.S. history.

3.

Cleveland's 1884 victory is historically important because (1) he was the first Democrat elected president since James Buchanan in 1856 - a 28-year Republican monopoly on the presidency was broken; (2) his election demonstrated that the Republican-Democratic competitive equilibrium that had begun in 1880 was real and would continue; (3) Cleveland would also win in 1892, making him the only president to serve two non-consecutive terms (22nd and 24th president); (4) the 1884 election showed Mugwump independents - Republicans who refused to support a corrupt nominee - could swing a national election. The 1884 result inaugurated the Cleveland-Harrison-Cleveland-McKinley sequence of close presidential elections that would dominate U.S. politics until 1896.

Cleveland was the structural break that ended the post-Civil-War Republican monopoly.